

**Nicholas Ashton Piano Recital, Scottish Arts Club, Sunday, 2<sup>nd</sup> June, 2024 at 3pm**

## **Programme**

**Joseph Haydn**

**Variations, F minor, Hob.XVII: 6 (1793) 15'**

**Robert Crawford: Prelude 1 (2011) First Performance 2'**

**Kenneth Dempster: Vista (2005) 3'**

**Robert Crawford: Sonata Breve (1991) 5'**

**Ludwig van Beethoven Sonata, A major, op 101 (1816) 21'**

## **Programme Notes by Nicholas Ashton**

**Joseph Haydn**

**Variations, F minor, Hob.XVII: 6 (1793) 15'**

This work, composed in 1793, is possibly Haydn's most celebrated work for solo keyboard not a sonata, or using sonata form in the specific sense. The structure of the work is almost unique, in that it consists of two contrasting themes; the first a melancholy and rhythmically angular figure in F minor and contrasted with a smoother and more lyrical second melodic theme in F major.

Both themes are in two parts, ie. each a short binary form.

These are each varied three times in the same order, before returning to the opening first theme, which disappears into a dramatic coda.

The relationship between the gently lilting accompaniment of the opening theme and the terse dotted rhythm of the melody – insistently present throughout the work – is one of its most fascinating elements. There is a balance, amongst the most perfectly realized in all Haydn's mature works, between a repetitive Classical symmetry and the positioning of silence as an importance constituent; this is most striking in the final return of the first theme and the coda, when the rhythm motif of the theme, modulating with increasing distance away from F minor, is dovetailed carefully with two controlled pauses. The effect is unsettling – it turns on its head the listener's expectations of what is to follow, rather in the

manner of the sudden evaporation of the regular, insistent rhythm – famously the feature of the second movement of the Symphony No 101 (“the Clock”).

### **Robert Crawford: Prelude 1 (2011) First Performance 2’**

This short piece was the last composition by the composer. It was written as an intended series of Preludes, although Robert sadly died before this could be completed. Although it is not dedicated to Nicholas, the composer gave him the score as a way of thanking him for the successful Delphian Records recording of his complete solo piano music and his Piano Quintet. This is its first performance.

### **Kenneth Dempster: Vista (2005) 3’**

This short work was written to celebrate the acquisition of a new piano (a Bösendorfer Model D Grand with extra bass notes) for the Music School at Edinburgh Napier University, where the composer is Composer-in-Residence and Lecturer. It received its first performance by Nicholas Ashton at a concert featuring staff and students in the piano department.

### **Robert Crawford: Sonata Breve (1991) 5’**

This work was commissioned by the 1991 Scottish International Piano competition as the test-piece. Eleven pianists performed the work and the winner (who also took overall First Prize in the competition) was the pianist, Sergei Babayan. The work is cast in a single movement, and makes extensive use of the middle, *sostenuto* pedal, which allows notes in the lower register of the keyboard to be held while playing freely in the upper registers, creating an almost double-instrument effect. The sonata was recorded by Nicholas for Delphian Records in 2007 in a CD comprising all of the piano music of the composer, coupled with his Piano Quintet, in which Nicholas was joined by the Edinburgh Quartet. The recording was very highly praised by the music press.

## **Ludwig van Beethoven**

### **Sonata, A major, op 101 (1816) 21’**

This work is one of the first commonly described as being a product of the composer’s “late” style/period, in which he further experimented with form and structure, harmony, melody and rhythm, and made extensive use of pre-Classical forms, such as fugue, canon and variation.

In fact, Beethoven was constantly experimental in all of his 32 piano sonatas; in the op 13 *Pathétique* sonata of 1798, the opening sonata-form movement is heralded by a free, improvisatory Introduction and in 1802, he adopted a theme and variations as an opening movement of the Sonata op 26 and a Fantasia-like approach in the Sonatas op 27 nos 1 and 2). Added to this, the transition between the so-called Early, Middle and Late styles was not

abrupt, but gradual; in the case of op. 101, there are stylistic and expressive precursors in the previous two sonatas, op 78 in F sharp and most particularly in op 90, in E minor.

Despite these caveats, op 101 marks a radical change of style and range in Beethoven's development. It is also one of the most technically demanding in the entire repertoire - especially the final fugue in the 4<sup>th</sup> movement, which, although shorter than the massive final movement fugue of the subsequent *Hammerklavier* Sonata op 106 of 1818, is pianistically much less generous and with a more densely concentrated contrapuntal argument.

The work opens with one of the most serene and expressively lyrical movements in all Beethoven's sonatas. A gently lilting 6/8 pulse recalls the sense of the pastoral, exploited in the wonderful 6<sup>th</sup> Symphony and the earlier D major Sonata, op 28 (Beethoven being at his happiest in his long walks in the Austrian countryside). Harmonically, the movement - despite being set in a very condensed sonata-form - is very unusual, in that it commences with an extended interrupted cadence in the dominant, and modulates away even further, to F sharp minor and then C sharp minor before finally settling in A. This brings an atmosphere of improvisation and freedom, despite the tightly controlled structure and immaculate polyphony.

The second movement is a vigorous march, but with many extraordinarily inventive and subversive rhythmic games – it appealed greatly to Robert Schumann, who almost certainly modelled the second movement of his own Fantasy op 17, on it. The movement is framed by an extremely precise, graceful Canon (at the octave) in place of the more usual Trio. A brief, but intensely expressive slow third movement gives way to a magical recollection of the opening bars of the first movement, before diving headlong into the final fourth movement, joyously indulging in expertly realised counterpoint and making full use of the newly added instrumental feature of a low E on the keyboard.

### **Nicholas Ashton Biography**

Nicholas Ashton was born in Preston, Lancashire. He was educated at Chetham's School, RNCM, on postgraduate scholarships at the Conservatoire de Musique Geneva, Musikhoschschule Frankfurt-am Main and at the University of Edinburgh.

His main teachers were Renna Kellaway and Joachim Volkmann, and he also received valuable coaching from Jorge Bolet, Joaquin Achucarro, David Wilde, Vlado Perlemuter and Nikita Magaloff, among others.

Nicholas performed widely throughout Europe in an early career as a soloist, establishing a comprehensive repertoire of over 20 concertos and recital programmes. Nicholas subsequently worked as a teacher, translator and assistant music agent for four years in Germany and one year in London.

Nicholas resumed his musical career through a full-time academic role at Edinburgh Napier University, where he worked as a Lecturer and Senior Lecturer for the widely-respected B.Mus Honours in Classical Music for nearly 30 years, combining this with increasingly extensive solo and chamber music performance as a result of encouragement from Murray Perahia (at the Snape Centre for Advanced Studies) and Menahem Pressler (at the Banff Centre for the Arts, Canada).

Nicholas has performed seven times in solo recital at the Queen's Hall, Edinburgh, with one recital being released as a CD in 1997, and has appeared many times as a soloist in Scotland, with several recordings and interviews given for the BBC at the former Queen Street Studios, Edinburgh and Studio 1, Glasgow.

Nicholas has been a regular collaborative (accompaniment/chamber music) partner, including with the Edinburgh Quartet, at the Hamburg Arts Association, the Cantilena Festival, Paxton House Summer Music Festival. He has appeared as a soloist throughout the UK, Germany, USA and Italy and Lithuania and has recorded many times for the BBC, on German, Swiss and Lithuanian and US Radio as well as commercially. A recording of the complete piano music and the piano quintet by the distinguished Scottish composer, Robert Crawford, was released to high critical praise on the Delphian Records label in 2008.

Nicholas is currently Principal Study Tutor for piano at the Royal Conservatoire of Scotland (RCS) and Examiner for Doctoral Programmes in performance; he also teaches at the University of Edinburgh and privately.

Nicholas has a strong interest in contemporary music for two pianos, enjoying a partnership in this area with the Lithuanian pianist, Lauryna Sableviciute, giving many premieres of new works in the medium. They have performed and recorded extensively in the UK and in Lithuania, with a projected CD commercial release in 2025-26.

Nicholas is also in demand for masterclasses and adjudication, including at RCS, St Mary's Music School, Birmingham Conservatoire, the High School of Dundee and Eton College.

Nicholas is a colleague of the distinguished Slovenian pianist, Sasa Gerzelj Donaldson at RCS in the Keyboard Faculty and they have begun plans to collaborate as a piano duo, exploring the rich mainstream repertoire for two pianos and piano duet, as well as reviving rare, undiscovered music in these media. Nicholas has also begun collaborating with the cellist Mark Bailey, with concerts planned for the forthcoming season.