

# The Telegraph

## Jonathan Biss, Queen Elizabeth Hall, review: 'an excitingly virtuosic performance'

John Allison sees Biss give expert renditions of works by composers ranging from Berg to Beethoven in this Vienna-themed recital



Jonathan Biss: one of the foremost Schumann pianists today Photo: Handout

By John Allison

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Where to open a programme largely connected to Vienna, that hothouse in which so much piano music has been composed? Jonathan Biss's solution, in his recital as part of the Southbank Centre's International Piano Series, was to plunge right into the maelstrom that is Berg's Op. 1 Sonata, a single movement evoking all the musical tensions of early 20th-century Vienna. Pushing against tonality, the work still sounds audibly in thrall to Wagner's *Tristan und Isolde*, and Biss's incredibly lucid account had a broad sweep. Almost caressing the piano's keys, he found the piece's longing and luminosity, yet his keenly analytical approach to musical structure also ensured

unusual clarity – the sonata’s arc was clearly traced, from the expectancy of its first bars to the desolation of its close.

It was a natural step from here to Schoenberg’s Six Little Piano Pieces, and Biss caught everything that is distilled into each of these haunting miniatures, which are might be likened to expressionist woodcuts. From sonorous textures to insistent motifs, Schoenberg distills so much into so few notes, especially into the profundity of the sixth piece, written soon after Mahler’s death in 1911.

Composed not long before the death of his friend Chopin in 1849, Schumann’s *Waldszenen* (the only non-Viennese work on the programme) was to be his last major cycle for the piano. The “forest scenes” of the title took this recital into different terrain, and also allowed for the evening’s first show of more traditional virtuosity, which this American pianist has in plentiful supply. Yet he still applied the same sort of pianistic integrity to the sometimes strange textures of this visionary composer. In “*Vogel als Prophet*” (“Bird as Prophet”), Schumann seems to upend traditional images of St Francis preaching to the birds, making the chorale of the middle section rather sermon-like.

Although Biss returned with Schumann’s *Arabesque* at the end of the evening by way of encore, the second half of his recital was devoted to Beethoven. The Sonata No. 25 in G brought plenty of light-footedness, especially in the witty finale, but Biss’s way of rattling through the first movement felt almost breathless. Yet no one could accuse this intellectual musician of dryness in the aria-like slow movement.

Though Beethoven’s “*Appassionata*” is a middle-period work, in Biss’s hands it most certainly points towards his late sonatas. After a suspenseful start, it quickly turned fiery, with the pianist in complete command of an excitingly virtuosic performance.