

The magic number

Wiener Urtext's new Primo editions pit famous figures against lesser-known composers to give intermediate students early access to hidden gems. *Femke Colborne* speaks to series author Nils Franke



THEY SAY GOOD THINGS come in threes, and publisher Wiener Urtext (WU) has taken this mantra to heart with its latest sheet music series, WU Primo. Each book in the collection, launched in 2013, features the music of three composers: two famous figures and one lesser known. The repertoire is designed to give students at around Grades 3-6 an introduction to some of the big names, while also introducing them to some hidden gems of the repertoire.

The composers for each volume are selected according to a common theme or time period – so Vol 1 features Bach, Handel and Domenico Scarlatti; Vol 2 is Haydn, Mozart and Domenico Cimarosa; Vol 3 is Beethoven, Schubert and Johann Nepomuk Hummel; and Vol 4, the latest release, is Schumann, Brahms and Theodor Kirchner. Vol 5, due for publication early next year, will feature works by Chopin, Liszt and Ferdinand Hiller.

'Three was the magic number here,' says Nils Franke (*pictured*), author of the WU Primo series. 'One or two would not have

offered enough variety in terms of style, and when you have four or five it becomes a more of a general anthology. Three seemed about right, because we were able to establish a theme and give it a focus but also maintain some variety. We chose two who hardly need an introduction, then one that has been somewhat forgotten but who we hope will emerge again.'

The commentary in the series draws on sources from the composers, their pupils and others who knew them – for example, the Hummel edition features a trill exercise set by Mozart, his onetime teacher, and the Schumann edition features descriptions from Clara Schumann, taken from her daughter's memoirs. The total commentary for each volume runs to 5,000 words, including biographies and insights on ornamentation, dynamics, tempos, improvisation, pedalling and other relevant elements of performance. 'So much more in terms of sources has come to light recently and we are taking a fresh look at what's available,' says Franke. 'There's a job to be done here, to give students and teachers access to new material and to help them develop certain technical skills.'

As well as forgotten compositions by lesser-known composers, the series also includes works from established composers that have fallen by the wayside over the years. According to Franke, there is no shortage of material to choose from. 'Even someone like Liszt, in the context of piano teaching, has a lot of undiscovered work,' he says. 'It's always assumed that his late period was sparse in terms of

piano writing, but that's actually not the case – we have included several pieces from the 1840s-1860s.' He gives the example of *La cloche sonne*, a short piece of about Grade 3 standard.

Other unknown gems in the series, according to Franke, include the Scarlatti Sonatas in Vol 1. 'There are more than 80 Scarlatti Sonatas suitable for about Grades 2-8,' he says. He gives the example of K415: 'It's about 30 bars long, but only five of them are hands together, so it sounds a lot more difficult than it actually is.' The same is true of the Cimarosa Sonata in D, C8, in Vol 5, he says: 'It's a 24-bar piece that sits at Grade 4 or 5, depending on how fast you play it. It has a concerto style like the early Mozart concertos, yet is incredibly economically written and a real insight into how to make the piano and the pianist sound good.' He also highlights the Beethoven Waltz WoO 85, a 16-bar miniature of about Grade 4 standard: 'It is the essence of Beethoven in three lines. One really doesn't have to play pages of music to get the flavour of a composer.'

As the series progresses, it will go on to cover music from the 20th century and beyond. 'The idea is not, of course, to do this in a prescriptive way,' says Franke. 'Instead, I like the idea of giving students and teachers access to music that has been graded, so that players can then construct their own overall curriculum from a range of options instead of following a more rigid approach. Finding music that captures a player's imagination is an immensely powerful tool for learning and for a student's success in playing the piano.' 🎹

