

# WIGMORE HALL

Thursday 11 April 2024  
7.30pm

Juan Pérez Floristán piano

György Ligeti (1923-2006)

Musica ricercata (1951-3)

*I. Sostenuto – Misurato – Prestissimo • II. Mesto, rigido e  
cerimoniale • III. Allegro con spirito • IV. Tempo di valse  
(poco vivace – 'à l'orgue de Barbarie') • V. Rubato.  
Lamentoso • VI. Allegro molto capriccioso •  
VII. Cantabile, molto legato • VIII. Vivace. Energico •  
IX. (Béla Bartók in memoriam) Adagio. Mesto – Allegro  
maestoso • X. Vivace. Capriccioso • XI. (Omaggio a  
Girolamo Frescobaldi) Andante misurato e tranquillo*

Alberto Ginastera (1916-1983)

Danzas argentinas Op. 2 (1937)

*Danza del viejo boyero • Danza de la moza donosa •  
Danza del gaucho matrero*

Interval

Modest Musorgsky (1839-1881)

Pictures from an Exhibition (1874)

*Promenade 1 • The Gnome • Promenade 2 •  
The Old Castle • Promenade 3 • Tuileries • Bydlo •  
Promenade 4 • Ballet of the Unhatched Chicks •  
"Samuel" Goldenberg und "Schmuyle" • Promenade 5 •  
The Market Place at Limoges • Catacombs (Sepulchrum  
Romanum) • Cum mortuis in lingua mortua • The Hut on  
Fowl's Legs (Baba-Yaga) • The Great Gate of Kiev*

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**György Ligeti's** *Musica ricercata* was composed between 1951 and 1953, a time when the young Hungarian composer was finding his own voice. The title suggests the Baroque contrapuntal form of the *ricercar*, from the Italian to 'search out', and Ligeti spoke of this work as an attempt to 'evolve a new music from nothing'. Hungary's regime of artist censorship at the time, however, meant that such a progressive endeavour would be a private one.

The work's 11 movements are connected by a strikingly simple idea: each uses an additional number of pitch classes from the preceding one, beginning with merely two, and progressing to the full twelve-note chromatic scale.

This highly restricted beginning means that the first movement is a study of rhythm and dynamics – we hear As at various octave positions, while Ds make an appearance only at the very end. But as the arsenal of notes increases, rigour alternates with playfulness. The third movement introduces triadic harmonies, in a mocking minor-major conversation. In the fourth, an imitation barrel organ waltz teeters teasingly, lacking enough notes to fully get going. In the seventh, the pianist's hands are rhythmically uncoupled, with a rapid bass ostinato bubbling away independently of an untroubled right-hand melody. When all pitches are finally available, Ligeti constructs a homage to Girolamo Frescobaldi, a leading proponent of the *ricercar*. In a movement he described as 'hovering between academic orthodoxy and deep reflection', he extends the principles of 17th-century counterpoint into 20th-century regions, before landing us right back where we began: on A.

The eclecticism, invention and wit of *Musica ricercata* point towards Ligeti's later music, most of it composed after he fled Hungary for the West in 1956. Six movements from the work have become popular in the wind quintet repertoire, rearranged as *Bagatelles*.

**Alberto Ginastera** is widely regarded as the most important Argentine composer of the 20th Century, and his 1937 collection of three Argentine dances Op. 2 demonstrates a vivid approach to national themes. The animated opener, 'Dance of the old herdsman', makes use of bitonality - the left hand whirls away in D flat major while the right hand plays syncopated clusters of C major harmony. The effect is a tornado of instability that soon peters out, but not before a brief imitation of that most Latin-American sound: the open strings of a guitar.

By contrast, 'Dance of the beautiful maiden' is a lyrical interlude with Chopin-esque introspection and swooning chromaticism. Ginastera's modern sensibility shines through, however, in brash dissonances at its climax, and a jazzy final chord. Finally, 'Dance of the outlaw cowboy' takes the energy of the opening movement up a couple of notches (perhaps this is the old herdsman's younger self!). Marked 'furiously rhythmic and energetic', it unfolds as an unrelenting toccata, only now the harmonic instability resolves into a bright C major for a sensational finish.

**Modest Musorgsky's** *Pictures from an Exhibition* is a landmark in Russian piano music; a work of ambition and sustained imagination. Its genesis lies in the tragically early death of Musorgsky's friend, the artist Viktor Hartmann, at the age of 39. A memorial exhibition of Hartmann's work was put on in St Petersburg in 1874, and Musorgsky composed *Pictures* – his longest instrumental work – in a few weeks of June that year.

The varied subjects of Hartmann's pictures, many of them made while travelling, offered plenty to inspire Musorgsky. But his stroke of genius was the motif for the *Promenade* through the gallery, a recurring device that ties the piece together. Its broad harmonies suggest grandiose architecture, while the irregular metre mimics the meandering gait of the visitor. It is also marked to be played 'in the Russian manner', and its highly singable chorale style sets a 'national' tone.

In each picture, Musorgsky's versatile characterisations are assured. There is spooky gothic scampering in *The Gnome*, a song of wistful melancholy in *The Old Castle* and light-footed silliness for a ballet costume design for 'unhatched chicks'. We hear French elegance for Hartmann's depictions of the *Tuileries* and Limoges market. "*Samuel Goldenberg und Schmuyle*" is based on sketches of two Polish Jews that Hartmann had gifted to Musorgsky – one rich, and one poor – and Musorgsky depicts them respectively through haughty solemnity and an imitation of a street musician's dulcimer. The ponderous march of *Bydlo* ('cattle') suggests a journey on a heavy Polish cart, with appropriately muddy low chords.

The final three movements form a particularly effective sweep. The sepulchral gloom of the Paris catacombs turns into a furious scherzo for the mythical crone Baba Yaga, whose hut, standing on hen's legs, was designed by Hartmann as a fantastical clock. We then arrive at the grandest of grand finales, inspired by Hartmann's competition entry for a triumphal gate in Kyiv (which at that time was part of the Russian Empire). In bell-like cascades and broad, monumental chords, Musorgsky crowns the work with noble magnificence, elevating his departed friend into the realm of national legend.

Sadly, the personal tragedy at the heart of this work was later compounded by Musorgsky's own death in 1881 from complications due to alcoholism. He was only 42. In 1886, *Pictures* was published posthumously, edited by Rimsky-Korsakov. Its chordal gestures and majestic climax evidently cried out for an orchestral arrangement, and in fact at least a dozen different orchestrations have been made, of which Ravel's 1922 score is now the most widely performed. Just as *Pictures* was Musorgsky's response to a friend's life cut short, this great work's success in symphonic halls is a touching tribute to a composer who surely had much more to give.

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