

WIGMORE HALL

Monday 11 March 2024
1.00pm

Elisabeth Brauss piano

Sergey Prokofiev (1891-1953)

From *10 Pieces Op. 12* (1906-13)

*Marche • Gavotte • Rigaudon • Légende •
Prélude • Allemande • Scherzo humoristique •
Scherzo*

Isaac Albéniz (1860-1909)

From *Iberia (Book 1)* (1905-6)

Evocación

Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827)

Piano Sonata No. 18 in E flat Op. 31 No. 3 'Hunt' (1802)

*I. Allegro • II. Scherzo. Allegretto vivace • III.
Menuetto. Moderato e grazioso • IV. Presto con
fuoco*



This concert is being broadcast on BBC Radio 3



Our Audience Fund provides essential unrestricted support for our artistic and learning programmes, connecting thousands of people with music locally, nationally, and internationally. We rely on the generosity of our audience to raise £150,000 each year to support this work. Your gifts are, and continue to be, indispensable.

To donate, please visit <https://wigmore-hall.org.uk/audiencefund>

Wigmore Hall is a no smoking venue. No recording or photographic equipment may be taken into the auditorium nor used in any other part of the Hall without the prior written permission of the management.

In accordance with the requirements of City of Westminster persons shall not be permitted to stand or sit in any of the gangways intersecting the seating, or to sit in any other gangways. If standing is permitted in the gangways at the sides and rear of the seating, it shall be limited to the number indicated in the notices exhibited in those positions.

Disabled Access and Facilities - full details from 020 7935 2141.

Wigmore Hall is equipped with a 'Loop' to help hearing aid users receive clear sound without background noise. Patrons can use this facility by switching hearing aids to 'T'.



Please ensure that watch alarms, mobile phones and any other electrical devices which can become audible are switched off. Phones on a vibrate setting can still be heard, please switch off.

The Wigmore Hall Trust Registered Charity No. 1024838
36 Wigmore Street, London W1U 2BP • wigmore-hall.org.uk • John Gilhooly Director

Wigmore Hall Royal Patron HRH The Duke of Kent, KG
Honorary Patrons Aubrey Adams OBE; André and Rosalie Hoffmann; Louise Kaye; Kohn Foundation; Mr and Mrs Paul Morgan



Supported using public funding by
**ARTS COUNCIL
ENGLAND**



Like so many children growing up in the twilight years of the Russian Empire, **Prokofiev** received his first piano lessons from his mother. Some of his earliest impressions were of her playing works by Chopin and Beethoven on the estate at Sontsivka (in modern-day Ukraine) that his father managed, and it was to her that he owed both his own steely technique and his early attempts at composition. Amongst his juvenilia there are many short pieces for solo piano – marches, rondos, waltzes, polkas and so on – and even some precocious attempts at opera. Later on, Prokofiev would return to some of these piano miniatures, revising and polishing them in light of the more secure technique he had learned, first as a private student of Glière and then at the St Petersburg Conservatory.

The *10 Pieces* Op. 12, were compiled between 1906 and 1913, sometimes reusing earlier student exercises. Janus-faced, they revisit Prokofiev's early years whilst also gesturing to his mature works. He was fond enough of the ninth of the pieces – a *Scherzo humoristique* – to adapt it in 1915 for the brilliantly eccentric combination of four bassoons. Full of playful wit and flashes of bracing irony, the sequence inhabits the same sound world as the 'Classical' Symphony or *The Love for Three Oranges*. In his autobiography, Prokofiev would categorise his music as having five main 'lines' – the classical, the innovative, the toccata, the lyric and the grotesque – and all five can be heard throughout the *10 Pieces*, sometimes separately, sometimes in combination.

Their titles, too, are significant. Harking back to the typical musical genres of the 18th Century, they show how Prokofiev turned his back on the Romanticism, emotionalism and subjectivism of Beethoven and Chopin (his mother's favourite composers, of course), flirting instead with the detached, stylised aesthetics of Neoclassicism. There is nothing especially 'Russian' about them either. Instead, they embody Russia's periodic striving to be part of Western European culture, as expressed by the Italianate vistas of St Petersburg or Prokofiev's own dapper, punctilious attire. Little wonder that he became such a celebrity in the musical world of interwar Paris, having left his homeland in the wake of the October Revolution of 1917.

Prokofiev's *10 Pieces* are the work of a brash and iconoclastic young composer embarking on his musical career and challenging the tastes and conventions of his teachers. By contrast, *Evocación* from *Iberia* by **Albéniz** is suffused with a tender melancholy that shows its composer looking back on his native country from abroad and reflecting on his own ill health and mortality. Albéniz was not quite 49 when he died in Cambo-les-Bains in southwest France in May 1909, having spent the previous few years in Nice and having suffered from what was later diagnosed as Bright's Disease for even longer.

Albéniz composed the 12 pieces that make up the four books of *Iberia* between 1905 and 1908. Well-

travelled and highly regarded in Paris and London during his lifetime, he has long been seen as one of Spain's greatest composers, and *Iberia* in particular is regarded as the highpoint of the Spanish solo piano repertoire. Yet it was precisely Albéniz's cosmopolitanism that led some at the time to regard him as a Spaniard 'in foreign attire' only. *Iberia* is certainly full of allusions to the music of Debussy and Ravel, and Albéniz's decision to subtitle the cycle 'impressions' only seemed to corroborate the suggestion that he was drawn more to Paris than to Barcelona or Madrid. *Evocación* surely confounds such a view. Full of the 'españolismo' that Albéniz had long sought in music, it deftly combines slow echoes of the *malagueña* from Andalucía with the livelier rhythms of Aragon's *jota*. Here, Spain emerges in all its gorgeously seductive variety, shrouded in the mists of the composer's nostalgic memories.

The title of *Iberia* belonged to Albéniz himself and his music was deliberately intended to evoke places, peoples and moods. The title of **Beethoven's** Piano Sonata No. 18, 'Hunt', was not an invention of its composer. Rather, like so many of the titles associated with his works, it is a nickname suggested by a listener who clearly thought that one of the themes of the finale resembled the call of a hunting horn (his previous sonata had been dubbed 'The Tempest' by an equally impressionistic listener). In truth, there is not much that is explicitly pictorial about the sonata. The third of a trio of piano sonatas written in 1802, it seems to combine aspects of 18th-century Classicism with elements of incipient Romanticism. Its four movements are genial and often energetic, and in place of an introspective slow movement, it has a relaxed minuet, by turns lyrical and sprightly. Viewed like this, the sonata feels like a direct descendent of Haydn and Mozart, and it would surely have gone down well in the salon world of Viennese high society, where Beethoven had many influential patrons.

Yet the sonata's rhetoric is altogether grander and more ambitious than that. Its home key is E flat major – the same as the Symphony No. 3 (the 'Eroica'), composed in 1803, and the Piano Concerto No. 5 (the 'Emperor', dating from 1809) – and many commentators have seen the sonata as inaugurating the second, 'heroic' era in Beethoven's life. There is a distinct swagger about much of the sonata and its harmonic language moves well beyond the expectations of the Classical style, just as its confidence and dynamism set it apart from the brooding of the late works. Yet to insist too emphatically on the 'heroism' of Beethoven's middle period works can be to overlook the warm humanity and spontaneous good humour that makes this one of his most approachable compositions.

© Philip Ross Bullock 2024

Reproduction and distribution is strictly prohibited