

WIGMORE HALL

Monday 12 December 2022
7.30pm



Supported by the Sir Jack Lyons Charitable Trust

Leeds Piano Competition 2021 prizewinner recital

Alim Beisembayev piano

Johann Sebastian Bach (1685-1750) French Suite No. 2 in C minor BWV813 (c.1722-5)
*I. Allemande • II. Courante • III. Sarabande •
IV. Air • V. Menuet I and II • VI. Gigue*

Franz Schubert (1797-1828) Piano Sonata in C minor D958 (1828)
I. Allegro • II. Adagio • III. Menuetto. Allegro • IV. Allegro

Interval

Franz Liszt (1811-1886) Etudes d'exécution transcendante S139 (pub. 1852)
*Paysage • Mazeppa • Feux follets • Ricordanza •
Allegro agitato molto • Harmonies du soir •
Chasse-neige*

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In association with the Leeds International Piano Competition

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Posterity attached the title of French Suites to a group of six keyboard suites completed by **Johann Sebastian Bach** around 1725. His contemporaries would have been puzzled by the description, given the disparity between the style of Bach's works and that of keyboard suites cultivated at the time by French composers. The first three French Suites, copied in draft form in the 1722 *Clavierbüchlein* for Anna Magdalena Bach, take their lead as much from the learned counterpoint of an earlier age of German keyboard composition as from the latest French fashions. Their sarabandes and minuets, however, embrace the lyrical elegance of the *galant* style, a concept recently imported to Germany from France and Italy. The Suite No. 2 in C minor BWV813 reflects the consummate skill with which Bach combined ancient and modern within the same work. It seems likely that the piece was conceived in the late 1710s, during the composer's time as *Kapellmeister* to Prince Leopold of Anhalt-Cöthen, probably for performance at court; it was used thereafter, like its companion French Suites, as a study piece for Bach's keyboard students.

Chronic illness and a shortage of money, the latter only temporarily relieved by a profitable concert in March 1828, blighted the final year of **Schubert's** life. Yet the steady exhaustion of his physical and financial resources did not diminish his creativity; if anything, it spurred him to produce some of his finest compositions, the Piano Sonata in C minor among them - the first of a remarkable trilogy of sonatas for the instrument. Much has been written about the formal ingenuity of Schubert's last sonatas and the way in which he treats the principal thematic ideas of each like characters in an unfolding narrative, recalling them in different harmonic guises to create a cycle of strong thematic ideas. The Sonata in C minor opens with a mighty chordal call to attention, immediately intensified by a rising scale and the dramatic contrasts that follow. The first theme plays with the ambiguity between C minor and A flat major, establishing a pattern of sudden modulation that pervades the opening movement. Schubert offers respite from the *Allegro's* turbulent emotions in the shape of a genial second theme, reminiscent of a folksong or popular hymn. Both themes supply rich material for a central development section volatile in its chromatic modulations and unexpected turns of harmony. The *Adagio* begins with a meditative introduction in A flat major, prelude to a restless journey into what feels like a lucid dream. Schubert uses a rondo-like ABABA form to bring the illusion of familiarity to his reverie while subverting it with unsettling half-step modulations and chromatic elaborations of the movement's main theme. The *Menuetto* feels remote from the high-spirited courtly dance for which it is named; rather, the brief movement amounts to a distillation of dashed hopes and present melancholy. While sonata form supplies the finale's solid structure, the movement's mercurial themes and unrelenting 6/8 rhythmic patterns appear ready to break every rule in the Classical composition textbook.

Rule-breaking and repentance belonged to the pattern of **Franz Liszt's** life. While not quite the tormented genius of Ken Russell's *Lisztomania*, he represented the celebrity virtuoso as high priest of the performing arts. The pianist-composer's youthful attraction to the socialist ideals of the Comte de Saint-Simon, strongly influenced by the teachings of Christ, and immersion in the revolutionary Christian sermons of the Abbé Felicité de Lamennais flowed into his lifelong relationship with Roman Catholicism; the Saint-Simonians' views on free love, meanwhile, appear to have conditioned Liszt's affair with the married mother Marie d'Agoult, cause of a notorious scandal and the couple's ensuing elopement from Paris to Switzerland in 1835.

During his 'years of pilgrimage' with Marie, Liszt refined his already legendary piano technique to support the highest degree of textural clarity, and began composing complex works to demonstrate his achievement. In the late 1830s he returned to the dozen studies he had composed during his mid-teens and used their themes for a set of *Grandes études*. He revised these in 1851, to make it possible for others to play them, and published all 12 the following year as *Études d'exécution transcendante*. Although generally known as the 'Transcendental Etudes', the collection's character is more accurately translated as 'Studies in increasing degree of difficulty'. Having launched the collection with a short *Prélude* and swaggering *Molto vivace*, Liszt continues to transcend conventional expectations of the piano's technical limits with the intense lyricism of *Paysage*, hallmarked by its sublime singing melodies and flowing triplet quavers in left and right hands.

Mazepa draws inspiration from an eponymous poem by Victor Hugo concerning the Ukrainian Cossack hero, Ivan Mazepa, who was tied naked to a wild horse after being caught making love to a nobleman's wife. Hugo's verse likens Mazepa's punishment and spiritual recovery to the wild ride of the creative imagination, a metaphor that Liszt takes up in what ranks among the most difficult of the Transcendental Etudes. Liszt's demonic pianism courses through *Feux follets* ('Will-o-the-wisps'), propelled by shimmering double-note figures in the right hand and leaping intervals in the bass. *Ricordanza*, the longest of the studies, catches the spirit of music drawn from memories of a dream, hazy yet deeply affecting, while the following *Allegro agitato molto* serves as a safety valve for the release of surfeit emotions. The penultimate study, *Harmonies du soir*, prefigures the adventures in tonality pursued by Liszt in his late piano pieces before unfurling a magisterial display of virtuosity for virtuosity's sake in the work's central section. The final study, *Chasse-neige*, conjures a scene of snowfall with a welter of demisemiquaver tremolos, chiming right-hand quavers and a storm of scales that heralds a great dramatic climax and spellbinding resolution.

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