

WIGMORE HALL

Wednesday 12 March 2025
7.30pm

This concert is supported by the Rubinstein Circle

Leif Ove Andsnes piano

Musicians from the Mahler Chamber Orchestra

Chiara Tonelli (*Italy*) flute
Olivier Doise (*France*) oboe
Vicente Alberola Ferrando (*Spain*) clarinet
Guillaume Santana (*France*) bassoon
José Vicente Castelló (*Spain*) horn
Matthew Truscott (*UK*) violin
May Kunstovny (*Austria*) violin
Joel Hunter (*UK*) viola
Frank-Michael Guthmann (*Germany*) cello

Igor Stravinsky (1882-1971)

Septet (1952-53)

*I. [Sonata Allegro] Quarter Note = 88 •
II. Passacaglia • III. Gigue*

Heitor Villa-Lobos (1887-1959)

Quinteto em forma de chôros (1928)

Francis Poulenc (1899-1963)

Sextet for wind quintet and piano Op. 100 (1932-9)

*I. Allegro vivace • II. Divertissement •
III. Finale*

Interval

Louis Vierne (1870-1937)

Piano Quintet in C minor Op. 42 (1917-18)

*I. Poco lento. Moderato • II. Larghetto
sostenuto • III. Maestoso. Allegro molto
risoluto*



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Stravinsky was at a turning point in his musical development when he wrote his succinct three-movement *Septet* for clarinet, bassoon, horn, piano, violin, viola and cello. By 1953, when the piece was finished, he had largely worked through a lengthy neo-classical phase and was on the cusp of a new engagement with serialism, the radical compositional technique based on sequences of the 12 notes of the chromatic scale. The *Septet* bears fingerprints of the neo-classical style from the start, with a bracing, motoric opening blast, followed by a robust joust between instruments of very different timbres, as the first of the piece's fugal episodes commences. It was, however, the second movement, a *Passacaglia*, which Stravinsky's long-time assistant and collaborator Robert Craft regarded as a key moment of artistic transformation in the composer's work. According to Craft, Stravinsky had been deeply affected by the death of his musical rival Arnold Schoenberg; they lived only a short distance from each other in Los Angeles, but did not communicate, yet Stravinsky seems to have felt the older man's passing marked the end of an epoch.

In an earlier decade, while living in Paris, Stravinsky might well have heard the music of **Villa-Lobos**, who found great success in the new music scene in the French capital in the 1920s. The Brazilian composer consciously drew upon the music of his homeland, in particular the *Choro*, a flexible musical form popularised at the end of the 19th Century. The name comes from Portuguese, meaning 'cry' or 'lament', though the tone is often lively and upbeat. The *Quinteto em forma de chôros*, from 1928, demonstrates its composer's skill for fusing popular styles and classical forms. A sequence of linked sections draws often on the lamentation inherent in the Brazilian *Choro*, though there's plenty of rhythmic drive and fire too, with the wind sonorities and the piling up of scales of different keys often bringing to mind Stravinsky's *The Rite of Spring*.

The *Sextet* for piano and wind instruments preoccupied **Poulenc** for much of the 1930s. He began the decade as the youthful challenger of convention, famed as one of the loose group of composers rather arbitrarily dubbed 'Les Six' by critic Henri Collet; by the end of the 1930s, personal tragedy had pushed Poulenc towards a new seriousness and deepened his interest in religious music. He began work on the *Sextet* in 1931 and a première followed in 1933, but he was unhappy with the piece, later telling Nadia Boulanger that 'there were some good ideas in it but the whole thing was badly put together.' He returned to it in 1939, reshaping the piece until it emerged in a form with which he was content. 'With the proportions altered [and] better balanced,' he declared, 'it comes over very clearly.'

The opening movement bursts with rollicking, helter-skelter drive, but also shows Poulenc at his most atmospheric and tenderly expressive. In the second

movement 'Divertissement', Poulenc plays around with wonderfully unaffected grace with a melody strikingly reminiscent of the famous tune which opens Mozart's Piano Sonata in C, K545. The finale bustles along like one of the afternoons out enjoyed by members of Les Six, veering finally into a conclusion of unexpected sincerity and grandeur.

It's the stuff of programme-note cliché to point out the correlation between the heightened emotion of a composer's music and the turbulence of their life, but in the case of **Vierne** and his Piano Quintet, the parallels are unavoidable. He achieved great success in his professional life, overcoming almost total blindness to rise to the position of organist of Notre-Dame de Paris, but suffered a succession of personal tragedies. He fell unexpectedly into marriage to a much younger woman; when the marriage fell apart, Vierne gained custody of Jacques, the eldest of their three children. Upon reaching the age of 17, Jacques pleaded to be allowed to join the French army during the First World War, but to his father's horror, he lost his life not long after joining the fighting on the Western Front.

Vierne was utterly devastated. In early 1918, a few months after learning of Jacques's demise, he wrote to a friend, 'To describe my state of mind now is unnecessary, isn't it? Life holds no material meaning for me anymore.' He reported that he was writing 'a quintet of vast proportions, imbued with the breath of my tenderness and the tragic destiny of my child. I will complete this work with an energy as fierce and furious as my pain is terrible. I will create something powerful, grandiose, and strong, stirring the deepest fibers of a father's love for his dead son. As the last of my name, I will bury it in a roar of thunder—not in a plaintive bleating of a resigned, blissful sheep.'

Barely able to see the manuscript paper before him, Vierne would press his nose to the stave, writing exaggeratedly large noteheads and often relying on the assistance of his beloved younger brother René. As he completed work on the Quintet, he received the crushing news that René had been killed in action at the front; the work now stood as a memorial to both of the composer's most precious relations, taken from him by the vicious cruelty of war.

What Vierne wrote, though, was no gloomy musical tombstone. Across three substantial movements, the Quintet rises from a harmonically ambiguous introduction initiated by the piano to music of fierce and expansive drama. It made an immediate impression on audiences, who responded to its engrossing atmosphere and tension. By communicating so effectively, Vierne had surely created a fitting tribute to his lost son.

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