

WIGMORE HALL

Sunday 12 May 2024
7.30pm

Federico Colli piano

François Couperin (1668-1733)

Les Baricades mystérieuses (pub. 1716-7)
Le carillon de Cythère (pub. 1722)
Les folies françaises, ou Les dominos (pub. 1722)

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (1756-1791)

Piano Sonata in A K331 (c.1783)
*I. Andante grazioso - Adagio - Allegro •
II. Menuetto • III. Alla Turca. Allegretto*

Interval

Sergey Prokofiev (1891-1953)

Visions fugitives Op. 22 (1915-7)
*Lentamente • Andante • Allegretto • Animato •
Molto giocoso • Con eleganza • Pittoresco •
Commodo • Allegretto tranquillo •
Ridicolosamente • Con vivacità •
Assai moderato • Allegretto • Feroce • Inquieto •
Dolente • Poetico • Con una dolce lentezza •
Presto agitato e molto accentuato • Lento
irrealmente*

Maurice Ravel (1875-1937)

From *Le tombeau de Couperin* (1914-7)
Prélude • Forlane • Rigaudon • Menuet • Toccata

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Les Baricades mystérieuses is the fifth of the eight pieces that **François Couperin** published as his Sixth Ordre (suite) for harpsichord, in his Second Book of harpsichord pieces. He published it in Paris in 1717, four years after his First Book. But as in the First Book, each Ordre comprises a series of short, characterful pieces, each with an amusing, charming or cryptic name. 'I have always had an object in writing each of these pieces, furnished by various occasions', he explains in the preface to the First Book. 'So the titles correspond to ideas that have occurred to me; I shall be forgiven for not going into greater detail'.

Though with *Le carillon de Cythère*, the seventh piece of his 14th Ordre (published in 1722), the title is self-explanatory: all of nature (birdsong included) peals like bells to welcome pleasure-seekers to the island of the goddess Venus. And with the extraordinary B minor *Les folies françaises* from the 13th Ordre (also published in 1722) he practically spells out a narrative. 'Les folies' refers to the celebrated Portuguese variation-subject *La Folia* (popularised by Corelli among others). Couperin's very Gallic take describes each of 12 short variations as a differently coloured 'domino': the cloak worn as part of a disguise at a masked ball. But costume, as we know, is code; and the courtesies of this ball conceal emotions ranging from modesty, via flirtation and jealousy to outright despair. Couperin tells his miniature love story without a single misplaced stroke.

'Asia begins at the Landstrasse', Klemens von Metternich is supposed to have remarked, and throughout the 18th Century Vienna was fascinated by Turkish culture. It was, after all, barely a century since the Ottomans had besieged the city. The sound of cymbals, drums and jangling triangle (often in conjunction with bustling tempi and zingy minor key harmonies) was known in Austria as 'Turkish' or 'Janissary' music; an exotic (if stereotyped) reminder of the Sultan's armies, and part of the popular appeal of **Mozart's** 1782 hit opera *Die Entführung aus dem Serail*.

Mozart himself described the final rondo of his Piano Sonata K331 as *Alla Turca*, and if (as Neal Zaslaw suggests) he composed it in the late summer of 1783 during his final visit to Salzburg, it might have been intended to give his family back home a taste of Viennese fashions. It serves as a playful discharge of tension at the end of a three-movement structure that's unlike any of Mozart's other sonatas. There is no sonata-form movement in the whole work: instead, there's a tender and sometimes poignant set of six variations on a lilting, siciliano-like theme that Zaslaw identifies as a Bohemian-German folksong, 'Freu dich, Mein Herz, denk' an kein Schmerz' ('Rejoice, my heart, think of no pain'), and a minuet that paces itself too pensively to be a dance. In context, that finale – so famous in isolation – is like a sudden, rather startling, burst of laughter. But then, Mozart was among friends.

The title *Visions fugitives* wasn't **Prokofiev's** own, and it was added only after the composition was complete. In August 1917 Prokofiev played his new piano suite at a soirée attended by the poet Konstantin Balmont. Balmont, after hearing the music, rose to his feet and, in what Prokofiev termed 'a magnificent improvisation', declaimed a sonnet: 'In every fugitive vision I see worlds, Full of the changing play of rainbow hues...'

It wasn't actually an improvisation (the poem was several years old). But Petrograd in the years immediately before the Bolshevik Revolution was a place of glittering illusions and dark prophecies. As the young Prokofiev cut his brilliant, bristling swathe through late imperial society, small pointed forms seemed to come naturally to him. Expression markings like *Ridicolosamente* were intended to tweak whiskers, and the *Visions fugitives* (1915-7) share the conciseness of his earlier piano works, as well as their eccentricities.

Yet there's also a new melancholy and gentleness to much of this music. After the fall of the Tsar in February 1917, Prokofiev had retreated to the countryside and became obsessed with stargazing. Only the 19th of the *Visions fugitives*, he wrote later, directly reflected what he'd witnessed in 1917: 'more a reflection of the crowd's excitement than of the inner essence of revolution'. The music's instability, as well as its haunted sense of transience, is a true inner reflection of an era of dissolution and change.

In October 1914, two months into the Great War, **Maurice Ravel** wrote to his friend Alexis Roland-Manuel. He was disappointed that he'd been rejected for military service and consoled himself that 'I am working for the Fatherland by writing music! At least, I have been told that enough times in the past two months...'. He outlined his musical plans, which included '(1) a French suite – no, it isn't what you think: La Marseillaise will not be in it, but it will have a forlane and a gigue'.

Ravel's idea of French music was rarely what his contemporaries expected. By the time his 'French suite' was finally performed in Paris in April 1919, six months after the Armistice, it had become *Le tombeau de Couperin*, and each of its movements was dedicated to a friend who'd died in the conflict. This isn't music of mourning, though, but of life – inspired by the grace and fantasy of dances by the 18th-century Couperin, bringing tonight's programme full circle. The bustling *Prélude*, the lilting *Forlane*, the graceful *Menuet* (inscribed to the memory of Jean Dreyfus, Roland-Manuel's stepbrother, who had died in a military hospital in June 1916) the boisterous *Rigaudon* and the evanescent, ultimately defiant final *Toccata* are each playful and coloured in exquisite keyboard hues. The sadness behind them is something you don't really hear – but which lingers, very faintly, after the notes have fallen silent.

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