

# WIGMORE HALL 125

Monday 13 July 2026  
7.30pm

George Xiaoyuan Fu piano

Olivier Messiaen (1908-1992)

Le loriot from *Catalogue d'oiseaux* (1956-8)

Fryderyk Chopin (1810-1849)

Scherzo No. 4 in E Op. 54 (1842-3)

Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827)

Piano Sonata No. 30 in E Op. 109 (1820)

*I. Vivace ma non troppo – Adagio espressivo •  
II. Prestissimo • III. Gesangvoll, mit innigster  
Empfindung. Andante molto cantabile ed espressivo*

*Interval*

George Xiaoyuan Fu (b.1991)

The Cat and His Music Master (2026) *world première*  
Commissioned by Wigmore Hall

Robert Schumann (1810-1856)

Fantasie in C Op. 17 (1836-8)

*I. Durchaus phantastisch und leidenschaftlich  
vorzutragen. Im Legendenton • II. Mässig. Durchaus  
energisch • III. Langsam getragen. Durchweg leise zu  
halten*



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## George Xiaoyuan Fu The Cat and His Music Master

As I was writing sketches of this new piece, my music paper was on top of a copy of Schumann's *Kreisleriana* Op. 16, a piece which I've studied for many years. The paper was fairly flimsy, so when the sun struck it at an angle one day, it became faintly transparent. The strong printed ink from the published edition of Schumann bled through the page, making his text visible against my freshly penned scribbles.

It reminded me of the experimental novel by ETA Hoffmann, *The Life and Opinions of the Tomcat Murr with a Fragmentary Biography of Johannes Kreisler on Random Sheets of Waste Paper* (1821). Murr, a cat who has learned how to read and write, pens his autobiography on the reverse side of the discarded pages of Johannes Kreisler's diary. Kreisler (the eponymous inspiration for *Kreisleriana*) is a brilliant but eccentric musician who works as the Kapellmeister at the fictional court of Sieghartsweiler. He is dashing, charming, acerbically hilarious, but also prone to episodes of darkness and deeply fears for his own madness.

Kreisler was a literary inspiration of Robert Schumann's, who sympathized with his Romantic outlook on an artistic life and the subsequent struggles for that within an indifferent society. I was struck by how current the themes felt, as the specific type of idealism espoused by Kreisler is still felt and struggled for by artists today.

On another level I also identified with the tomcat Murr, who is all too pleased with his own poetry and prose; it turns out they are often plagiarisms of great writers that he's ingested and unwittingly regurgitated. Being a pianist who has spent virtually the entirety of my life studying 'the canon', putting on my composer hat can sometimes feel like being a naive cat making little scratches on the obverse side of great works.

I've decided to embrace this by creating a recital work that conjures Hoffmann's phantasmagorical tale. Kreisler tears through a panoply of emotional states, while various episodes of feline music are spliced throughout (the cat meows, runs across the keyboard, and recites poetry a bit too earnestly); Schumann's music also bleeds through the paper, painting a theatrical, postmodern tableau which pays homage to his marvelous and forward-looking music.

© George Xiaoyuan Fu

**Messiaen** allows himself a boast in the preface to his *Catalogue of Birds*. 'The repeated field-trips necessary for the notation of each bird's song were sometimes long before the actual composition of the piece. His notations being very precise, the author could without difficulty equally reawaken memories from a few hours or several years before.' He adds: 'The work is twice dedicated: to its winged models; and to the pianist, Yvonne LORIOD.' Loriod, his second wife, is of course the homonym of tonight's piece, the second of 13.

Arriving in Paris in 1831, **Chopin** found that his Romantic good looks, refined playing and interesting back-story – having fled from a conquered Poland – gave him the entrée to the smartest drawing-rooms. Though he could not perhaps compete with really flashy pianists like Herz or Thalberg, he burnished his technical credentials from time to time with barnstorming pieces like the four Scherzos: the B minor, begun on the way to Paris as he reluctantly turned his back on a defeated Poland; the B flat minor (1837), one of three pieces that subversively end in the wrong key, as it were; the C sharp minor (1839), which featured in his almost comically reluctant concert of 1841; and tonight's E major, which one could almost believe to be by Richard Strauss – what a harmonist Chopin was! He performed in public rarely, but he charged the earth for a piano lesson. The *Musical World* described him as 'a species of musical Wordsworth, inasmuch as he scorns popularity and writes entirely up to his own standard of excellence'.

In 1820 **Beethoven** was feeling his age: beset by lawsuits about the guardianship of his nephew Karl, late with the *Missa Solemnis* for the enthronement of the Archduke Rudolph, his favourite pupil, as Archbishop of Olmütz, and troubled by ill health which in the first months of 1821 confined him to his bed for six weeks with rheumatic fever. And as always, playing publishers off against one another to squeeze a bit more money out of them.

In April 1820, Beethoven interrupted work on his Mass to compose a piano piece that was probably intended for Friedrich Starke's forthcoming Piano Method. It may have been this didactic purpose that decided him to concentrate on one unusual aspect of the magnificent pianoforte that Thomas Broadwood had sent him from London a couple of years before. It possessed a Broadwood speciality, a divided sustaining pedal. The wooden pedal was simply sawn in two, the right-hand half raising the dampers from middle C up, and the left-hand half raising the dampers from middle B down. Works exploiting this device – Mendelssohn's Sonata Op. 6 and *Rondo Capriccioso* Op. 14, for instance – are often in the key of E, because its important note B (the dominant) can be held on by the left-hand part of the pedal, while harmonies change above. Beethoven's piece was in E,

and details of its rhythmic notation suggest that he was thinking in terms of one hand being more sustained than the other.

A month later, however, the Berlin publisher Schlesinger offered him 90 ducats (getting on twice Beethoven's late brother's Civil Service salary, to give a rough comparison) for three piano sonatas, and the E major piece quickly became the first movement of Op. 109, any didactic purpose it may have had as a pedalling exercise lost in the translation. The completed sonata was sent to Schlesinger in the autumn, and published a year later.

The C major Fantasy began life as a single movement, a lament for the forced removal of his beloved Clara Wieck to Dresden, far out of **Schumann's** reach, by her father, the composer's piano teacher. 'Ruins' was Schumann's title, and towards the end he wove in a little tune from the end of Beethoven's aptly titled song-cycle *To the distant beloved*. Beethoven thus in his mind, it was a natural

thing for Schumann to enlarge his lament into a fundraising sonata for the proposed Beethoven memorial in Bonn. He wrote a bouncy march, seemingly inspired by the one in Beethoven's Sonata Op. 101, which he called 'Trophies', and a final slow movement, 'Palms'. The whole thing was rather paradoxically entitled both *Obolen auf Beethovens Monument* (an obol was a Greek coin of little value, so one could translate that as 'a few pence for Beethoven'), and also *Grand Sonata by Florestan and Eusebius*. Schumann's literary imagination led him to people his music with characters, many of them simply Schumann in disguise. He could be Eusebius or Florestan or David, always fighting the Philistines, a personification of artistic ignorance that seems to have originated with Schumann. And if you notice that Clara, David, Eusebius and Florestan, form an alphabetical sequence, you'll start to get some idea of how Schumann's mind worked.

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