

WIGMORE HALL

Tuesday 14 February 2023
7.30pm

Boris Giltburg piano

Fryderyk Chopin (1810-1849)

Ballade No. 1 in G minor Op. 23 (c.1831-5)

Ballade No. 2 in F Op. 38 (1836-9)

Ballade No. 3 in A flat Op. 47 (1841)

Ballade No. 4 in F minor Op. 52 (1842)

Interval

Sergey Prokofiev (1891-1953)

From *10 Pieces from Romeo and Juliet* Op. 75 (1937)

Juliet as a Young Girl • Montagues and Capulets •
Mercutio • Romeo and Juliet Before Parting

Maurice Ravel (1875-1937)

Gaspard de la nuit (1908)

I. Ondine • II. Le gibet • III. Scarbo

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Chopin has often been called 'the poet of the piano', and when it comes to the four *Ballades* that he composed between 1831 and 1842, this seems a particularly apt description. The term 'ballad' originally described a song accompanied by dancing, but by the 19th Century, it had come to refer to a literary stylisation of a folk narrative in verse form. It was a genre favoured by the German Romantics, from Goethe and Heine to the Brothers Grimm, who used it to evoke the mysterious world of the popular imagination. It was also bound up with the search for national origins and cultural self-determination at a time when many European peoples chafed under imperial rule.

So did Chopin have such ideas in mind when he chose the term 'Ballade' for these powerfully expressive single-movement piano works? Some commentators have suggested that they allude to the literary ballads written his fellow Pole, the poet Adam Mickiewicz, whose 1822 collection *Ballads and Romances* was a primer in Polish Romantic nationalism. It is tempting to see Chopin as a musical analogue to Mickiewicz and as the voice of Poland at a time when his country was divided between Austrian, Prussian and Russian. Paris, where Chopin lived between 1831 until his death in 1849, was home to a large number of patriotic Polish exiles, who had fled their homeland after the failed uprising of 1830.

If we can perhaps hear something of the nostalgia and regret felt by so many émigrés in the *Ballades*, their inspiration is both more intimate and more abstract than that. The first is dedicated to Nathaniel von Stockhausen, Hanoverian ambassador to France, and the second to Schumann, whose own *Kreisleriana* had honoured Chopin. The third and fourth – dedicated to Princess Pauline de Noailles and Baroness Charlotte de Rothschild – attest to friendships with the important female patrons who governed Paris's aristocratic salons. The *Ballades* are above all testaments to friendship and artistic affinity. They are also evidence of Chopin's formidable artistry, as much as of his reflective poetry. Musicologists have pored over the complexity of their formal structure and dramatic rhetoric, which seem to suggest not so much a concrete and coherent programme, as an invitation for listeners to explore their own imaginative responses to aesthetic stimuli.

The inspiration behind **Prokofiev's** *10 Pieces from Romeo and Juliet* is altogether clearer. Best known for his seven symphonies, five piano concertos and nine piano sonatas, Prokofiev was nevertheless a creature of the stage, who devoted himself to opera, ballet, and later, cinema. Indeed, one of the reasons behind his permanent return to the Soviet Union in 1936 was the prospect of being able to throw himself into the kind of collaborative works that had proved impossible to realise during his time in the West. *Romeo and Juliet* was commissioned in 1934, and although it is now seen as one of Prokofiev's masterpieces, it had a troubled beginning. The ballet was first seen in Brno, Czechoslovakia in December

1938, and would not make it to the Soviet stage until January 1940, when it finally opened at Leningrad's Kirov Theatre.

Prokofiev was an inveterate arranger and recycler of his own compositions. If a work offended the censors, he would plunder the outlawed score and reuse its best ideas in new contexts. As a virtuoso pianist, he would make fresh transcriptions for his own instrument. He raided *Romeo and Juliet* on a number of occasions, publishing a selection of ten highlights for solo piano in 1937, as well as two orchestral suites (a third would follow in 1946). Prokofiev identified five main 'lines' which made up his compositional style – the classical, the innovative, the toccata, the lyric and the grotesque – and all of these can be heard in the four movements performed here, where they serve to conjure up Shakespeare's characters and situations with astonishing vividness and vitality.

Like many turn-of-the-century French musicians, **Ravel** adored Russian music, which he saw as an antidote to the heaviness and solemnity of the Austro-German classics (especially in the decades after France's defeat in the Franco-Prussian War of 1870-1). He certainly learned much from the colourful orchestral scores of Balakirev, Borodin and Rimsky-Korsakov, as well as from such virtuoso piano works as Balakirev's *Islamey* and Musorgsky's *Pictures from an Exhibition* (which he famously orchestrated in 1922). Indeed, *Scarbo*, the third movement of *Gaspard de la nuit*, was intended to be yet more difficult than Balakirev's fiendish *Islamey*, and Ravel confessed that 'perhaps I let myself get carried away!' *Gaspard de la nuit* is, though, not just the product of Ravel's musical inspiration – it records a whole series of literary and visual influences too. Based on three poems from *Gaspard de la Nuit*, a collection of prose poems by the French Romantic poet Aloysius Bertrand, it breathes the same fantastical air as the gothic tales of Edgar Allan Poe. Bertrand's collection was subtitled *Fantasies à la manière de Rembrandt et de Callot*, two 17th-century artists who represented contrasting facets of human nature – one philosophical and contemplative, the other swaggering and rumbustious.

Ravel claimed that 'my ambition is to say with notes what a poet expresses with words', and in *Ondine*, he summons up the spirit of Bertrand's seductive water sprite, who tries – yet fails – to lure the poet into joining her as the king of her aquatic realm. In *Le gibet*, Ravel matches Bertrand's melancholy evocation of 'the bell that tolls by the walls of a city under the horizon, and the corpse of a hanged man, reddened by the setting sun.' And in *Scarbo*, he depicts the iridescent movements of a demonic goblin 'pirouetting on a single foot and whirling around the room like a spindle that has fallen from a witch's distaff.'

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