

WIGMORE HALL

Thursday 14 July 2022 7.30pm

2021 Guildhall Wigmore Prizewinner Recital

Gabriele Strata piano

François Couperin (1668-1733)

Les Baricades mystérieuses (pub. 1716-7)

Les ombres errantes (pub. 1730)

Les tours de passe-passe (pub. 1730)

La visionnaire (pub. 1730)

Le tic-toc-choc ou Les maillotins (pub. 1722)

Fryderyk Chopin (1810-1849)

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

Olivier Messiaen (1908-1992)

Première communion de la Vierge from *Vingt regards sur l'Enfant-Jésus* (1944)

Fryderyk Chopin

Ballade No. 1 in G minor Op. 23 (c.1835)

Interval

Erik Satie (1866-1925)

Gymnopédie No. 1 (1888)

Gymnopédie No. 2 (1888)

Gymnopédie No. 3 (1888)

Fryderyk Chopin

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

Henri Dutilleux (1916-2013)

Le jeu des contraires from *3 Préludes* (1973-88)

Fryderyk Chopin

Ballade No. 4 in F minor Op. 52 (1842-3)

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The edition of **Couperin's** *Four Books of 'Pieces'* on my shelves is edited by the great 19th-century Handel scholar, Friedrich Chrysander, in collaboration with Johannes Brahms; a pleasant reminder of the breadth of Brahms's interests, and of Couperin's aptness for the piano – I doubt if Brahms ever played a harpsichord. The original German text of Chrysander's Preface claims Couperin as the first great *keyboard* composer; the French translation uses the word *clavecin*; while the English version bluntly says *pianoforte*. (Quite wrong, of course: Byrd, Sweelinck, Froberger?) My two volumes are too handsome for actual use, which is as well, since more modern editions exist that would not be spoiled by a pencilled fingering, and which perhaps come closer to the original publications of 1713, 1717, 1722 and 1730. One modern editor notes that the original (engraved) print was 'noteworthy for its extraordinary notational precision', and brags that his edition maintains the distinction between 'curved ties and straight legato slurs'. It might have been simpler just to issue a facsimile, for this editor has resisted the all too prevalent urge to add fingering. (Oddly enough, Sir William Sterndale Bennett also made a similar notational distinction a hundred and thirty years later, though he used straight horizontal brackets for ties and curved lines for legato, which seems more instinctively right.)

Couperin's pieces are grouped into 27 Ordres or Suites. Almost all these little dance movements – Allemandes, Gavottes, and so on – are given sub-titles. As the Books progress, the sub-titles take over, in an orgy of programme music. There is a slightly random element about the groupings, so a selection such as this, from four different suites, is pleasantly within the spirit of Louis XV's France. The titles are as mysterious as the barricades: 'wandering shadows'; 'juggling tricks'; 'little hammers'.

Chopin's four Ballades explore a new way of composing; no longer the sonata forms arrived at by Haydn and Mozart, which, however wonderfully disguised by the composer's fancy, exemplify a rigorous harmonic logic; but rather an allusive logic of melody and tempo, hard to capture in notation, and therefore rare in performance. At every turn of the music, what happens next can sound mysteriously inevitable, or like just one thing after another, according to the insight of the performer.

The first Ballade seems to sum up the composer's feelings about Russia's conquest of his native Poland, mirroring the entry he made in his diary in 1831 in Stuttgart, on hearing of the fall of Warsaw: 'Oh God, Thou art! Thou art and avengest Thyself not! Thou hast still not enough of the Muscovite crimes, or, or Thou art Thyself a Muscovite!' Yet the Ballade remains a piece of music, not an accompaniment for some unrealized political agenda, or even a poem, despite the title.

All four of Chopin's Ballades use a lilting *tum-ti tum-ti tum* rhythm which gives them a strangely narrative quality. And they all end with the incoherent passion that marks the First. The Second

Ballade, written between 1836 and 39, is a strange mixture, a real Jekyll and Hyde of a piece. It begins with a simple tune, and then it tears off its sheep's clothing. The Third Ballade has always been the most popular ever since it was written: a musical bran tub, full of good things.

Chopin was famous for his subtle '*rubato*' playing: a way of pulling the time around for greater expression. A hundred years ago, the opening of the Fourth Ballade became a touchstone *rubato* case for devotees of Tobias Matthay, who expounded the impeccably moral case for 'paying back' the 'stolen time'. I remember the delightful Guy Johnson, who continued Matthay's traditions at the Academy in my student days, explaining to me how the 'average' of this introduction would work out at the 'right speed', playing it most beautifully as he did so. Matthay's Principal at the Royal Academy of Music, Sir John McEwen, who was also irked at Matthay's moonlighting at his own Piano School, pointed out that the 'average' could work out whatever random speed the pianist started at, and went so far as to publish a book to explode his principal piano Professor's ideas, measuring piano rolls (in millimetres – very scientific at the time) in order to establish that the *rubato* of famous pianists had no such moral dimension whatsoever. The subtle part of the *rubato* trick, according to both Chopin and Mozart, is that the accompaniment in the left hand should carry on at the proper pace, while the right hand scurries forward or hangs back, miraculously getting back with the left hand for important moments: a bit like taking a puppy for a walk.

Messiaen's 'Twenty Ways of Looking at the Infant Jesus' was composed in 1944. It brings together the composer's devout Christian faith, his modal theories, where his symmetrical invented scales produce harmonies of great power, and his rhythmic ideas – for instance, in this particular *Regard*, the repeated bass notes, supposed to be the heart-beat of Christ in the womb, spell out a series of prime numbers.

Satie composed his 'nude dances' (a *gymnopaedia* was a festival of naked choral singing and war dances for the men of Sparta) while working as a bar pianist in Montmartre. His title gives him a tincture of ancient Greek respectability. This was a time when repressed Parisian hostesses liberated themselves by enacting Greek tableaux, which of course sometimes involved taking all their clothes off in the name of Art. Some of Debussy's most beautiful, and stillest, music was also composed for these occasions.

Henri Dutilleux made his own style, incorporating what he heard in Debussy, Ravel and Messiaen, along with Bartók and Stravinsky and jazz. *3 Préludes* comprises three movements: Shadow and Silence, On the Same Chord, and The Game of Opposites.

A splendid programme of music from Paris.

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