

WIGMORE HALL

Monday 14 October 2024
7.30pm

Alexander Melnikov piano
Alexei Lubimov piano, fortepiano
Mikhail Shilyaev piano
Olga Pashchenko piano

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (1756-1791)

Fantasia in D minor K397 (c.1782)
Andante - Adagio - Allegretto

Franz Schubert (1797-1828)

Impromptu in A flat D899 No. 4 (1827)

Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827)

32 Variations on an Original Theme in C minor
WoO. 80 (1806)

Franz Schubert

Divertissement à la hongroise in G minor D818
(1824)

*I. Andante • II. Marcia. Andante con
moto • III. Allegretto*

Interval

Andrey Volkonsky (1933-2008)

Musica stricta (1956)

Igor Stravinsky (1882-1971)

Concerto for 2 pianos (1932-5)
*I. Con moto • II. Notturmo. Adagietto •
III. Quattro variazioni • IV. Preludio e fuga*

Valentin Silvestrov (b.1937)

Kitsch Music (1977)
*I. Allegro vivace • II. Moderato •
III. Allegretto • IV. Moderato •
V. Allegretto*

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart

Larghetto and Allegro in E flat K.deest (?1782-3)
completed by Robert Levin

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To celebrate the 80th birthday of the visionary pianist, fortepianist and harpsichordist Alexei Lubimov, whose influence spans the 20th and 21st centuries, three outstanding pianists and the master himself come together for a programme which starts and ends with Mozart but encompasses a wide range of repertoire in between.

It is comparatively unusual for a piano and a fortepiano to share a stage. Our pianistic forebears would have approved of this concert. In her glittering Paris salon in the 1770s, Mme Brillon (Anne Louise Brillon de Jouy) held court at a variety of pianos, much to the admiration of Charles Burney (though he thought she was too fond of raising the dampers). She composed an immensely interesting work that reveals what was valued in different keyboard instruments at the time: a trio for 'piano anglois, fortepiano allemand et clavecin', sampling the small square pianos made in London by Germans like Johannes Zumpe, the harpsichord-shaped pianos made by Andreas Stein in Augsburg, and the quintessentially French harpsichords of makers like Pascal Taskin.

The great variety of early pianos means that works by Mozart, Beethoven and Schubert may have been designed for entirely different instruments, and it's as interesting to transfer them to another early instrument as it is to try them on the modern variety. An ear-opening evening awaits, no matter which piece is played on which piano.

Half tonight's concert is devoted to well-loved Viennese composers, two of whom at least rubbed along well enough with the powers-that-be. The other half of the programme explores composers who had much more trouble with the authorities. **Volkonsky** was born in exile in Geneva, his aristocratic family having had to flee Russia. They were able to return to Moscow in 1947, and Andrey, having begun piano studies with Dinu Lipatti at the Geneva Conservatoire, started to study composition, only to be expelled from the Moscow Conservatoire for transgressing some pettifogging regulation. In a spirit of non-conformity, he took up the harpsichord and the organ, founded the Ensemble Madrigal, and began to perform Early Music, then a rarity in Russia.

In his composition, he took up the techniques of serialism – *Musica stricta* is an early example – which were very much frowned upon by the purveyors of Soviet Realism. Performances of his music were discouraged, to say the least, though it was 25 years before he requested to leave the country. He was immediately expelled from the Union of Soviet Composers, and all his concerts and record contracts were cancelled. But he was not allowed to leave for months. He returned to Geneva in 1973, and died in Aix-en-Provence.

Silvestrov was born in Kyiv. He trained as an engineer, but taught himself the piano up to the age of 15, when he began to take evening classes. Like Volkonsky, Silvestrov had trouble with the Composers' Union, but he worked as

a composer in Kyiv for 50 years. He left for Berlin in 2022. His stylistic journey poses an important question. Confronted with a piece in a radical style, his teacher asked him whether he actually liked it. Taking a metaphorical deep breath, Silvestrov answered 'Yes' – but the question became 'ingrained within his soul', as he put it. Many who were trained in contemporary composition techniques during the 1970s will recognize this slightly Faustian situation. *Kitsch Music* is a cycle of pieces composed at different times, but recently revised with new markings like *leggiero* and *dolce*. He notates minute nuances, with particular attention to the sustaining pedal. He uses the term *kitsch* 'in an elegiac rather than an ironic sense', transforming simple source material to see it in a new light – or, to make the metaphor more apt, to hear new echoes from the past.

Stravinsky's early discovery by the ballet impresario Diaghilev meant that he was out of Russia when the Great War erupted. The loss of his Russian estates after the Revolution meant that he spent the rest of his life based successively in Switzerland, France and the USA. The neo-classical Concerto for 2 pianos is one of the works he composed specifically to acquire an income from performance. It was his first work as a French citizen, and one of his personal favourites.

Mozart's D minor *Fantasia* is very much the sort of thing he would have improvised. It was published after his death, and the manuscript is lost. The cheerful printed conclusion was possibly not Mozart's own – some pianists improvise something closer to the opening mood. The manuscript of the *Larghetto and Allegro* has some gaps in the second piano part – perhaps Mozart played the second piano, and saved himself some copying time. The piece has been completed by several hands: there's even a version for two pianos and orchestra, while tonight's is by the American pianist and Mozart scholar **Robert Levin**. Its form is reminiscent of Mozart's concert arias.

It is said that **Beethoven**, hearing someone practising his *Variations*, asked, 'Who wrote that?' And yet a more typical Beethoven piece could scarcely be imagined, from the familiar key of C minor to the forceful piano writing. Perhaps it was the Baroque, chaconne-like nature of the theme that threw him.

Schubert's A flat *Impromptu* starts off in A flat minor, a key so unusual that Schubert used the key signature of A flat major and wrote the C flats in as they turned up. This obviously terrified the Viennese publishers: they waited 30 years before they published it, along with its companion, the G flat *Impromptu* – though they were still terrified of all those flats, and published that in G.

The *Divertissement à la hongroise* was written in Hungary where Schubert was giving piano lessons to Count Esterhazy's daughters. Piano duettists are all abidingly grateful to Schubert – that most sociable of composers.

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