WIGMORE HALL 125

Monday 15 December 2025
7.30pm

This concert is supported by the Sir Jack Lyons Charitable Trust

Leeds Piano Competition 2024 Prizewinner Recital

Jaeden Izik-Dzurko piano

Johann Sebastian Bach (1685-1750)	Partita No. 4 in D BWV828 (1729) *I. Ouverture • II. Allemande • III. Courante • IV. Aria • V. Sarabande • VI. Menuet • VII. Gigue*
César Franck (1822-1890)	Prélude, choral et fugue (1884) *I. Prélude. Moderato • II. Choral. Poco più lento • III. Fugue. Tempo I*
	Interval
Aleksandr Skryabin (1872-1915)	Fantasie Op. 28 (1900)
Sergey Rachmaninov (1873-1943)	10 Preludes Op. 23 (1901-3) *No. 1 in F sharp minor • No. 2 in B flat • No. 3 in D minor • No. 4 in D • No. 5 in G minor • No. 6 in E flat • No. 7 in C minor • No. 8 in A flat • No. 9 in E flat minor • No. 10 in G flat*

UNDER 35S

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JS Bach proudly published six keyboard 'Partitas' as his Opus 1 in 1731. But how so? After all, he had already written around 800 pieces, including revered masterpieces such as the Brandenburg Concertos and the *St Matthew Passion*. There is no mystery, however, since in Bach's time, music normally circulated through manuscript copies rather than through the printing press. Music publication, when it took place, favoured saleable pieces for domestic music making, such as trio sonatas or suites for harpsichord, and Bach's Op. 1 Partitas fell into this category.

The Partitas were indeed the pinnacle of Bach's keyboard-suite writing, and a summation of his mastery of French, Italian and German keyboard styles. The title page claims that the pieces would give pleasure to 'music lovers', but the technical demands and musical complexity were unprecedented for works of this kind, and were a stiff challenge for professionals of the day, let alone 'music lovers'. Partita No. 4 begins with an *Overture* in the French style, which consists of the majestic slow introduction and a livelier second section. Then the 'gallant' dances begin: and unusually lyrical *Allemande*, an ornate *Courante*, and a pensive *Sarabande* that takes several surprising harmonic turns. A cheery aria, in spite of the name, is another dance, in a style more rustic than its courtly companions. The final *Gigue* follows the German tradition, with fugal writing and a second half beginning with an inversion of the theme.

Bach earned the admiration of his contemporaries, but after his death, he sank into relative obscurity. As publication became more common, there were attempts to reawaken interest in his music, with keyboard editions edited by his son, CPE Bach, and later by Beethoven's pupil, Carl Czerny. But it was Mendelssohn who finally succeeded in gaining a mass audience for Bach, when, at the age of only 20, he directed a performance of the *St Matthew Passion* in 1829. Thereafter, Bach continued rising in stature and became a household name across Europe. Mendelssohn wrote a set of preludes and fugues in imitation of Bach, and other composers gradually followed suit, reabsorbing Bach into the tradition.

One of the most eminent of these 19th-century Bachians was the Franco-Belgian composer César Franck. Although his main income came from his work as a church organist, one of his major ambitions was to synthesize the cerebral and often austere Bach with the sumptuous and dashing virtuosity of Liszt, and succeeds brilliantly in his *Prelude, choral and fugue* of 1884. Where other imitators of Bach often produced pieces that were solid and worthy rather than inspired, Franck finds in Bach a stimulus rather than a curb to his musical fantasy. He rethinks Bach's mighty organ textures for and ruminative harmonic progressions for the modern piano, and forges the resulting material into a unified Romantic tone poem that suggests a fervent spiritual quest. The *Prelude* contrasts fleet figurations more urgent, questioning motifs. The *Choral* section suggests a procession, the more 'objective' chordal section interacting with a soloistic, searching theme. The questioning motifs return and gradually congeal into a fugue theme. The *Fugue* increases in grandeur to incorporate a dramatic finale, bringing back themes from the *Prelude* and the *Choral*, to end in the joyful peal of cathedral bells.

Where Franck's pianism sets out from Liszt, the young Alexander Skryabin took Chopin as his inspiration, and even, bizarrely, chose to sleep with a volume of Chopin under his pillow. By 1900, when Skryabin wrote his *Fantasie* Op. 28, the influence was thoroughly assimilated, and no longer plainly evident on the surface, since Skryabin had developed his unique style, turbulent and angular, alongside contrasting passages of fragile, refined lyricism. Although the *Fantasie* does not yet inhabit the world of Skryabin's later, atonal works, it already seems to strive for the impossible. The composer eventually took this striving to the utmost extreme, when he designed a kind of mass musical ritual, the 'Mysterium', that would supposedly bring about the end of the world. Everything about the *Fantasie* is extreme: the emotions are overheated, successive climaxes pile up on top of each other, and the piano textures are sometime unplayable as written. This is a restless 'creative spirit' at play, engaged in exceptional explorations, with an element of the demonic (according to the composer himself).

Skryabin's Conservatoire classmate, Sergei Rachmaninov, wrote his 20 Preludes, Op. 23, at around the same time (1901-3), alongside his celebrated Second Piano Concerto. The immediately recognisable Rachmaninov style is already fully formed, with lengthy, sinuous melodies, bold rhythms, elaborate multi-layered textures, and a highly virtuosic approach to the keyboard that draws from Chopin and Liszt in equal measure. The moods range from deepest gloom, as in Prelude No. 1, to a vivid out-of-doors celebration, as in No. 2 (another piece that evokes church bells). No. 3 is a strangely threatening minuet, and No. 4 a delicious nocturne. Iron-willed rhythms prevail in the march of No. 5, keeping the middle-section's heart-rending melody in check. In No. 6, though, the melody is indulgently allowed to wend on its own way to its apex and back. In No. 7 we seem to be on Franck's territory, with echoes of Bach and organ-like sonorities. No. 8's flying figurations are as relentless as in any Chopin *étude*, but hidden behind them are the warmer strains of a salon waltz. The double-note *étude* in No. 9 also has an underground stream, this time carrying deeper emotions. The heart-stopping finale is the slow-burning No. 10, exemplifying Rachmaninov's perfect judgement not only in building up to a climax, but also taking a gradual descent that is post-climax, but never an anti-climax.