

# WIGMORE HALL

Monday 15 January 2024  
1.00pm

Inon Barnatan piano

Franz Schubert (1797-1828)

6 Moments musicaux D780 (1823-8)

*No. 1 in C • No. 2 in A flat •  
No. 3 in F minor • No. 4 in C sharp minor •  
No. 5 in F minor • No. 6 in A flat*

Sergey Rachmaninov (1873-1943)

Moments musicaux Op. 16 (1896)

*No. 1 in B flat minor • No. 2 in E flat minor •  
No. 3 in B minor • No. 4 in E minor •  
No. 5 in D flat • No. 6 in C*



This concert is being broadcast on BBC Radio 3



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In 1883, the American artist Charles Frederic Ulrich painted his *Moment Musicale* (it resides today in the de Young Museum in San Francisco). A young woman is seated at an upright piano in a well-appointed drawing room. To her left stands a pot plant on a jardinière; to her right, a lacquered vase suggesting the contemporary vogue for *japonisme* and *chinoiserie*. Reflecting aspirational taste in bourgeois America, the painting also records the importance played by Germany and its arts throughout the artist's life. Ulrich (whose father was a German immigrant to the United States) was born in New York in 1858, trained at the Academy of Fine Arts in Munich, spent extended periods of time in Germany and died in Berlin in 1908.

Ulrich's decision to call his painting 'Moment Musicale' explicitly reflects this cultural heritage through its allusion to the *6 Moments musicaux* D780 that **Schubert** composed between 1823 and 1828. It also suggests the kind of audience that Schubert had in mind when writing these works in the first place. Like Beethoven, Schubert enjoyed no official court or church appointment that might provide him with a stable source of income. Instead, he was dependent on enlightened aristocratic patronage, as well as on the sale of his compositions to a growing middle-class audience. Many of his smaller, seemingly occasional piano pieces were designed to appeal to this amateur market, which consisted in large measure of women. Yet the word 'amateur' rather underestimates the sophistication of their taste and their technical proficiency at the keyboard. Such female performers may not have appeared in public, but they cultivated artistic refinement in the domestic world of the middle-class home. Schubert himself would also have played such pieces at the evenings of poetry, music and conversation that were such a part of early 19th-century Viennese life.

Like the *Impromptus*, the deceptively unassuming title of the *Six moments musicaux* (as their first publication in 1828 called them in imperfect French) conveys little of the wistful imagination, delicate charm and, at times, fiery bravura that they contain. It might seem tempting to trace their rapidly changing moods to Schubert's state of mind at the time. Over the course of the 1820s, he suffered from increasing ill health and knew bouts of profound unhappiness. Yet to insist too emphatically on such a connection would be to downplay the creative ingenuity that these miniatures display, as well as to underestimate how much innovation could still be derived from seemingly familiar forms. Schubert makes clever use, for instance, of 18th-century dances such as the minuet and the sicilienne. Elsewhere, he comes close to the world of song (the third movement was originally published as an *air russe*). Structurally, he favours the simplicity of ternary form – an ABA structure that is the kind of thing a novice student might write – yet invests this with an astonishing sense of drama and emotion.

Towards the end of the 19th Century, **Rachmaninov** would purloin Schubert's title for his own *Moments musicaux* Op. 16, written in 1896. Rachmaninov had made a spectacular debut with his opera *Aleko*, written in just three weeks in 1892 as a graduation exercise from the Moscow Conservatory, and which premièred at Moscow's Bolshoi Theatre in May 1893. Yet despite belonging to Russia's landed gentry, Rachmaninov was in sore need of money (his father had long since sold off the family's five country estates to repay his many debts). His earliest compositions were, therefore, designed to satisfy Russia's nascent market for enjoyable, accessible classical music. In 1892, he published his *Morceaux de fantaisie* Op. 3, which included the perennially popular C sharp minor *Prelude*. This one piece – surely his most overexposed composition – would actually make him very little money indeed, thanks to the poor terms of the contract he signed with his publisher. Next came the *Morceaux de salon* Op. 10, whose very title signals their intended audience (and its aspirations to European gentility). The *Moments musicaux* complete this trilogy of piano miniatures in the salon mould. Rachmaninov's intention in writing them was, once again, financial, at least to begin with. That autumn, a thief stole a substantial sum of cash that he was carrying; anxious to compensate for this loss, he turned again to a genre that he knew would sell well (for good measure, he also dashed off a set of 12 songs to words by popular poets).

There is more, of course, to the *Moments musicaux* than such blatant commercialism. As a virtuoso pianist, Rachmaninov invested even the most conventional musical material with considerable flair and ambition. These are works that would surely test the skills of even the most assiduous amateur. And as a composer who had studied with some of Russia's leading teachers – Arensky, and above all that great contrapuntist, Taneyev – he had honed a mastery of form and structure that he would always put at the service of his music's palpable emotional reach. Rachmaninov added two of Schubert's *Moments musicaux* to his performing repertoire in 1918, but his own *Moments musicaux* are really a homage to another composer: Chopin, whose music he revered and often emulated. The odd-numbered movements are expressive and lyrical, echoing the mood and intonations of Chopin's nocturnes. The even-numbered movements are by contrast swifter, even heroic at times, evoking the world of Chopin's etudes. If the third sounds like a melancholy cortege, then it is enough to recall that Rachmaninov was an outstanding interpreter of Chopin's Second Piano Sonata, with its famous slow *marche funèbre*. The citation of the *Dies irae* chant from the Latin Mass for the dead is, though, a gesture that was entirely Rachmaninov's own. Its solemn, tolling melody would haunt him throughout his life.

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