

# WIGMORE HALL

Monday 15 July 2024  
1.00pm

Yevgeny Sudbin piano

Franz Liszt (1811-1886)

Funérailles S173 No. 7 (1849)

Fryderyk Chopin (1810-1849)

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

Claude Debussy (1862-1918)

L'isle joyeuse (1903-4)

Aleksandr Skryabin (1872-1915)

Piano Sonata No. 10 Op. 70 (1912-3)

Franz Liszt

Danse macabre (after Saint-Saëns) S555 (1876) arranged  
by Vladimir Horowitz arranged by Yevgeny Sudbin



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Having established himself as the greatest pianist the world was ever likely to see, **Liszt** retired from solo performance at the age of 36. He had begun his *Harmonies poétiques et religieuses*, from which *Funérailles* is drawn, around 1834. They were published in 1853, with a suitably poetic preface by Alphonse de Lamartine, which specifically recommends solitude, for meditative souls, as a means of reaching ideas of the infinite. Liszt's spiritual bent took a religious turn later in his life, when he took minor orders and became 'the Abbé Liszt'. *Funérailles* has the subtitle 'October 1849', but that is merely the date of its composition. The occasion that prompted the piece was the Hungarian Revolution of the year before, which was summarily crushed by the Emperor.

**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. 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 an incoherent passion. Chopin was famous for his subtle *rubato* playing: a way of pulling the time around for greater expression. In *rubato*, according to both Chopin and Mozart, 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.

In 1870, **Claude Debussy** escaped with his mother from the Prussian Siege of Paris to Cannes, where he began piano lessons. His father remained in Paris, fighting with the Commune, which was briefly in power in 1871. On the return of the national government, Debussy père was imprisoned for a year. The themes of pianism and revolution can thus be seen to have established themselves early in Debussy's mind: much of his oeuvre deals with them, though his musical revolution is so euphonious that it often slips past unnoticed.

*L'isle joyeuse* was composed in 1904. It was perhaps inspired by the painting *L'embarquement pour Cythère* ('The Embarkation for Cythera') by Jean-

Antoine Watteau. The visual aspect of Debussy's imagination was strong. He loved the paintings of Turner and Whistler, and he detested the word 'Impressionist', whether applied to painting or music. Cythera was the birthplace of the Goddess of Love; Debussy's sensuous response ignores the vexed question of whether Watteau was actually depicting a departure from the island.

**Skryabin's** life, like Wagner's, was dedicated to the realisation of some mighty opus, a *Gesamtkunstwerk*. Wagner managed it: Skryabin only got as far as purchasing the land for his equivalent of Bayreuth, a plot in Darjeeling (India being the home of mysticism in Skryabin's mind) for the production of his *Mysterium*. It came to nothing after Skryabin's death from sepsis. As a youngster, Skryabin used to take Chopin to bed with him, and he began composing by transforming familiar Chopin genres – mazurkas, nocturnes, études and preludes. But sonatas took over, the First appearing in 1892, the Tenth (and last) in 1913. The last five have just a single movement. Skryabin said of his Ninth Sonata: 'This is almost not music, not melody, but... an incantation in sound'. Its nickname, 'Black Mass', was not Skryabin's invention, but once someone else had called it that, he saw how useful a nickname can be. 'In the Ninth Sonata I have touched most profoundly the satanic,' he remarked. 'It is genuine evil... the *Satanic Poem* (written 10 years before) is but a foreshadowing of the Ninth. There, Satan is a guest, but here he is at home'. He was similarly accommodating with the suggestions of others when it came to the Tenth Sonata, though fortunately the image he discussed with a friend has not attached itself to the piece as a nickname: 'Insects, butterflies, moths – they are all living flowers. They are the most subtle caresses, almost without touching... They are all born of the sun and the sun nourishes them... This sunlike caress is the closest to me – take my tenth sonata – it is an entire sonata from insects'.

**Saint-Saëns** originally composed his *Danse macabre* in 1872, as a song setting a poem based on a play – a Hallowe'en dance of death. In 1874 he re-cast it for orchestra. Shortly after, Liszt transcribed it for solo piano – but for its full diabolical dose of virtuosity, it had to wait for Vladimir Horowitz's version, which he recorded in 1928. Doubtless, Yevgeny Sudbin has found that even more can be done!

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