

# WIGMORE HALL

Saturday 16 December 2023  
7.30pm

This concert is supported by Sam and Alexandra Morgan

Boris Giltburg piano

Fryderyk Chopin (1810-1849)

24 Preludes Op. 28 (1838-9)

*Prelude in C • Prelude in A minor •  
Prelude in G • Prelude in E minor •  
Prelude in D • Prelude in B minor •  
Prelude in A • Prelude in F sharp minor •  
Prelude in E • Prelude in C sharp minor •  
Prelude in B • Prelude in G sharp minor •  
Prelude in F sharp • Prelude in E flat minor •  
Prelude in D flat • Prelude in B flat minor •  
Prelude in A flat • Prelude in C minor •  
Prelude in E flat • Prelude in C minor •  
Prelude in B flat • Prelude in G minor •  
Prelude in F • Prelude in D minor*

Interval

Sergey Rachmaninov (1873-1943)

13 Preludes Op. 32 (1910)

*Prelude in C • Prelude in B flat minor •  
Prelude in E • Prelude in E minor •  
Prelude in G • Prelude in F minor •  
Prelude in F • Prelude in A minor •  
Prelude in A • Prelude in B minor •  
Prelude in B • Prelude in G sharp minor •  
Prelude in D flat*



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In the winter of 1838-9, **Chopin** found himself on the island of Mallorca with his lover, George Sand, and her two children. It was hardly an idyllic setting. The couple's plans to settle in Palma were thwarted when a doctor deemed Chopin's tuberculosis to be too great a threat to the local population, so they took up residency in the Carthusian monastery at Valldemossa instead. The weather was often poor, as was the cuisine. To compound matters, Chopin's piano failed to arrive on time. The wonder is not just that he could compose at all in such circumstances, but that the work he completed there was the set of *24 Preludes* Op. 28. As he wrote to his friend, the pianist and publisher Camille Pleyel, on 22 January: 'I am sending you my *Préludes*. I finished them on your little piano which arrived in the best possible condition in spite of the sea, the bad weather, and the customs at Palma.'

At the time, the prelude was seen as little more than a delicate salon miniature, and these short works have long been central to the repertoire of budding amateur pianists (although many of them would tax the technique of all but the most gifted virtuoso). 'Preluding' also suggested an improvisatory warm-up exercise before a grander and more substantial composition. Chopin's genius was to accord the prelude a stature all of its own and to intuit its ability to convey moods that range from fleeting delicacy to intense pathos. The vividness of the *Preludes* has long inspired listeners to seek out their particular sources of inspiration. Sand herself began this tradition, suggesting that the fifteenth prelude – typically referred to by its nickname, the 'Raindrop' – depicted a dream that the composer had had, in which 'heavy drops of icy water fell in a regular rhythm on his breast.' Chopin, however, denied any such intention. As Sand confessed: 'He was even angry that I should interpret this in terms of imitative sounds. He protested with all his might – and he was right to – against the childishness of such aural imitations. His genius was filled with the mysterious sounds of nature, but transformed into sublime equivalents in musical thought, and not through slavish imitation of the actual external sounds.'

There is, though, another very different source of inspiration behind the *24 Preludes*. Chopin took with him to Mallorca a copy of Bach's *Well-tempered Clavier*, and his preludes are an explicit homage to the older master. Just as Bach had done in each of his two books of 24 preludes and fugues, Chopin produced a prelude in each major and minor key, although he arranged them in a different order. Do they form, then, a complete and coherent cycle? Chopin never performed them as such, but there is certainly a powerful underlying architecture to the set that emerges when they are heard in a single sitting.

Chopin's *Preludes* were a great influence on later composers. Schumann responded characteristically

to their shifting moods and imaginative approach to musical form: 'they are sketches, beginnings of *études*, or, so to speak, ruins, individual eagle pinions, all disorder and wild confusions.' Liszt heard them as 'poetic preludes, analogous to those of a great contemporary poet, who cradles the soul in golden dreams...' Of the seventeenth, Mendelssohn wrote: 'I love it! I cannot tell you how much or why; except perhaps that it is something which I could never at all have written.'

It was, though, **Rachmaninov** who was Chopin's greatest heir. Rachmaninov adored his music, regularly including it in his recitals, and taking the twentieth *Prelude* (in C minor) as the basis for his own *Variations on a Theme of Chopin*, Op. 22 (1902-3), written at the same time as his *10 Preludes* Op. 23 (1901-3). Yet where Chopin's are the product of a single bout of creative inspiration, Rachmaninov's were composed over nearly two decades – between 1892 (the infamous *Prelude in C sharp minor*) and 1910. Chopin carefully arranged his preludes according to a logical harmonic progression; Rachmaninov's range across the 24 major and minor keys with no discernible structure. But both composers agreed on their shared debt to the example of Bach. Interviewed in America in 1910, Rachmaninov explained that 'a prelude, in its very nature, is absolute music, and cannot with propriety be twisted into a tone-poem or a piece of musical impressionism.' He went on: 'its primal function is to give intellectual pleasure by the beauty and variety of its form. This was the end sought by Bach in his wonderful series of Preludes, which are a source of unending delight to the educated musical listener.' As he cautioned his listeners: 'If we must have the psychology of the Prelude, let it be understood that its function is not to express a mood, but to induce it.'

The *13 Preludes* Op. 32 were written in just under three weeks in the summer of 1910. Between 1906 and 1909, Rachmaninov had lived mainly in Dresden, so what are we to make of the claim that the tenth prelude was allegedly inspired by Arnold Böcklin's painting *The Homecoming*? This final book of preludes seems to show Rachmaninov at his most spontaneous and improvisatory, yet it is governed by a profound inner logic, both within each prelude, and across the set as a whole. Dissatisfied with one of his performances, Rachmaninov once explained that each piece he played was 'shaped around its culminating point: the whole mass of sounds must be so measured, the depth and power of each sound must be given with such purity and gradation that this peak point is achieved with an appearance of the greatest naturalness, though actually its accomplishment is the highest art.'

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