

WIGMORE HALL

Tuesday 16 July 2024
7.30pm

Russian Masters

Leslie Howard piano

Aleksandr Porfirievich Borodin (1833-1887)

Petite Suite and Scherzo (1885)

*Au couvent • Intermezzo • Mazurka in C •
Mazurka in D flat • Rêverie • Sérénade •
Scherzo – Nocturne – Scherzo*

Aleksandr Glazunov (1865-1936)

Thème et Variations Op. 72 (1900)

Interval

Anton Rubinstein (1829-1894)

Piano Sonata No. 4 in A minor Op. 100 (c.1876-80)
*I. Moderato con moto • II. Allegro vivace •
III. Andante • IV. Allegro assai*

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There is one element that looms over this recital of Russian 19th-century piano music: the so-called 'Mighty Handful' (the term coined by the Russian critic Vladimir Stasov in 1867). It was a self-appointed group of five composers dedicated to sustaining Russian national tradition (initiated by Glinka) at the time of the intoxicating western European Romanticism of Liszt, Berlioz and Wagner. The original group had gathered round their arbiter of style and chief trustee, the long-lived Balakirev (1837-1910), in the early 1860s, and included **Aleksandr Borodin**, the illegitimate son of a Georgian noble. Borodin became a distinguished research chemist, his primary occupation, and was also a competent pianist and accomplished cellist, in much demand for the chamber music soirées that would have included his own compositions. Balakirev took him under his wing in 1862, pushing him towards more overtly Russian, large-scale work – the Mighty Handful didn't really 'do' chamber music – notably his only opera *Prince Igor* (a historic epic like Musorgsky's *Boris Godunov* or Glinka's *A Life for the Tsar*). But, as with other works by him, and to the increasing frustration of his fellow musicians, *Prince Igor* kept Borodin fitfully occupied for the rest of his life and was never completed – at least, not by him.

Borodin did, however, find time in 1885, near the end of his life, to return to the small scale in which he felt more confident. His *Petite suite* in its original form had seven short pieces – *Au couvent* ('In the convent'), *Intermezzo*, two *Mazurkas*, *Rêverie*, *Sérénade* and *Nocturne* – and there was also a separate *Scherzo* in A flat without a Trio, which, after Borodin had died, was added to the *Petite suite* with the *Nocturne*, suitably transposed, inserted as the Trio. The draft of the suite met with approval from Liszt, to whom Borodin showed the work in Weimar that summer; they had first met several years earlier, on which occasion Liszt's advice to him had been uncompromising: 'Work in your own way and pay no attention to anyone'.

Borodin's original title for the suite had been *Petit poème d'amour d'une jeune fille* ('A girl's little love-poem') and he supplied the programme for a girl's developing feelings for a young man: her religious contemplation yields to yearnings for society life (*Au couvent* and *Intermezzo*); she fantasises about dancing and a particular dancer (the two *Mazurkas*); her feeling for dance and her growing love for the dancer (*Rêverie* and *Sérénade*); and finally she is loved (*Nocturne*). It was Glazunov, one of the next generation of the Mighty Handful, who, in the Russian tradition of one composer tinkering with, improving or finishing the work of another, had taken on completing Borodin's *Prince Igor*. Additionally, he not only presented the *Petite suite* in its published form, but orchestrated it.

As a teenager, **Aleksandr Glazunov** was steered by Balakirev to study with Rimsky-Korsakov (also one of the Mighty Handful), although by then (the early 1880s) Balakirev's mantle had been assumed by the philanthropist, publisher and patron Mitrofan Belyayev, who promoted his young protégé around western Europe, including arranging meetings with Liszt and Wagner. Apart from his eight

symphonies (plus a start made on a ninth) and a number of Tchaikovskian ballet scores, Glazunov is also remembered for his prodigious appetite for alcohol – Shostakovich's father was able to help him when vodka was in short supply – and for drink-conducting the disastrous première of Rachmaninov's Symphony No. 1 (which was rubbished by the composer and critic César Cui, another of the Mighty Handful).

Glazunov wrote his *Thème et Variations* Op. 72 in 1900, the theme based on a Finnish folksong that he also used in his *Finnish Fantasy* Op. 88 for orchestra. The theme is only seven bars long, and the dominant key is F sharp minor. Glazunov initially regularises the theme into eight-bar variations, then starts expanding its potential from the seventh variation (of 15) onwards, including variation 9's romantic adagio tranquillo in A major, with a central section in a new key, another slow variation, No. 14, written in G flat major (the same as F sharp major), and a return to the home key for the brilliant finale.

The Mighty Handful had little influence over the development of **Anton Rubinstein**, a Russian with a strong Germanic bias and one of the great figures of conservative 19th-century Romanticism, taking his composing cue more from Mendelssohn, Schumann and Chopin than the Wagnerian modernisms of late Liszt. As a child prodigy he had played for Chopin and Liszt (the latter declining to take him on as a pupil), he toured throughout Europe and the United States as the first great international Russian pianist and, like Liszt, he was a prolific composer – his works include six symphonies, five piano concertos, many solo works for piano and 20 operas, among them *The Demon*, which is still on the fringes of the repertoire – and he founded the St Petersburg Conservatoire in 1862 (where Glazunov later was also director). His resemblance to Beethoven was much remarked upon – Liszt referred to him as Van II – and he had huge hands, which accounted for clusters of wrong notes in performance.

His playing was also noted for its volcanic vitality and apparent virility – he was described by Hans von Bülow as the 'Michelangelo of music' – and these qualities define his last Piano Sonata, No. 4 in A minor Op. 100. The first three were composed in the late 1840s and early 1850s, with a gap of 25 years before No. 4 appeared around 1880. It is on a much grander scale, with a significantly longer and stormy first movement (including a repeat) in generously thematic sonata form. The opening of the scherzo second movement has a brief but marked similarity to the opening of Chopin's *Scherzo* in his Piano Sonata No. 2 and has the same wildness. The trio rotates a simple tune, first heard in octaves from the left hand. The *Andante* third movement is a stream of melody that keeps returning to the opening material, the mood alternating between Mendelssohnian Song without Words and Chopin in *Nocturne* mode. The finale has a strong measure of Lisztian rhetoric and brings the work to a heroic and virtuosic close.

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