WIGMORE HALL

Wednesday 16 July 2025
7.30pm

Kirill Gerstein piano

Robert Schumann (1810-1856)	Blumenstück Op. 19 (1839)
Thomas Adès (b.1971)	Az ág (The Branch) (2022)
Robert Schumann	Faschingsschwank aus Wien Op. 26 (1839-40) *I. Allegro • II. Romanze • III. Scherzino • IV. Intermezzo • V. Finale*
	Interval
György Kurtág (b.1926)	Fleurs nous sommes from *Játékok Book 1* (1973) *Virág az ember... (1a) • Virág az ember... (1b) • A csillag is virág... • Virág az ember... (3) • Virág az ember... (4a) • Virág az ember... (4b) • És mégegyszer: Virág az ember...*
Thomas Adès	Berceuse from *The Exterminating Angel* (2018)
Sergey Rachmaninov (1873-1943)	Lilacs Op. 21 No. 5 (1902)
Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky (1840-1893)	Waltz of the Flowers from *The Nutcracker* Op. 71 (1891-2) *arranged by Percy Grainger*
Francisco Coll (b.1985)	Waltzes Toward Civilization (2024) Commissioned by John Kongsgaard and Chamber Music in Napa Valley for Kirill Gerstein *I. Waltz in the Branches • II. Little Viennese Waltz*
Maurice Ravel (1875-1937)	La valse (1919-20)

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A programme of flowers and waltzes – and a waltz of the flowers – opens with a flower piece **Robert Schumann** wrote in the waltz city of Vienna, his *Blumenstück* of 1839. The work is an intricate circling of motifs, including, from the start, the downward-scale figure that was the composer's Clara theme. This appears in all five of the strains, which make a daisy-chain of repetition and difference, the second returning in abbreviated form as a refrain, with changes of key.

Thomas Adès takes us into waltz time with his 'Az ág' (The Branch), or perhaps more into the remembrance of waltz time. Playing for hardly more than a minute, the piece is Adès's transcription of one of his *9 Hungarian Songs*, this number setting a poem by Sándor Weöres where the green shade beneath a bending branch is in the observer's eyes, while the feeling is in the leaves: 'outside and inside / in a single moment / fuse'.

Faschingsschwank aus Wien (Carnival Jest from Vienna) was another product of Schumann's first stay in Vienna, drafted in mid-March 1839, to be completed the following winter back in Leipzig. He described it as a 'grand Romantic sonata', though it starts not with a movement in sonata form but with a dance medley. Schumann could have encountered the first Johann Strauss and his orchestra, but Vienna for him was the city of 'my Beethoven and Schubert', and one of Schubert's waltzes (the E major from the *Valses nobles*, D969) provided the model for his own main theme. This proudly introduces and punctuates a succession of other dances that offer at once contrast and correspondence, the last, before the final reprise, being in silvery steps offset by disconcerting chromatic edgings.

This ten-minute opener is followed by three much shorter movements, beginning with a suddenly disturbing apparition at the ball in G minor. After working its way with overt difficulty to C major, it comes back as before. After that interlude, dancing continues in the *Scherzino*, succeeded by a minor-mode song with characteristic rippling inner action. Then the colour and swirl of carnival are back, in a finale that is at last in sonata form.

In his late 40s **György Kurtág** discovered the challenges and possibilities of writing short pieces for young pianists, and he has gone on producing volumes of these *Játékok* (Games), outgrowing the pedagogical imperative. In the very first volume he placed a short section from his biggest work till then, *The Sayings of Peter Bornemisza* for soprano and piano: 'Virág az ember' (Flowers we are), a thread of melody that has reappeared in later volumes of *Játékok* and other works.

Next, Thomas Adès returns with an arrangement he made for Kirill Gerstein of the Berceuse from the third act of his opera *The Exterminating Angel*. Gentle descents in shadowed light become less gentle and diminish again – though that is not how the piece ends.

Bell sounds are omnipresent in the two-minute 'Lilacs', which is again a composer's transcription of one of his songs, the composer in this case being **Rachmaninov** and the song one of a set of 12 he composed in 1900-2. The poem, by Ekaterina Beketova, sees someone going at dawn to be in the green shade (once more) and perfumed air of lilacs.

Tchaikovsky's 'Waltz of the Flowers', the finale of the suite he drew from his *Nutcracker* ballet (1892), is another piece we hear in its composer's solo piano version.

The waltz diptych that **Francisco Coll** wrote for Gerstein last year springs off – not for the first time with this composer – from Lorca, specifically from the eponymous section of *Poet in New York*. At once entranced and appalled by the city, Lorca came up with a sunburst of imagery, form and colour, which Coll magnificently emulates. As in the two poems, waltz rhythm wobbles through subversion and contradiction, but now with music's powers to refer (to a specific Viennese waltz early on), sway, play hide-and-seek with itself, and seduce. Coll switches Lorca's order to place his big piece first and gives his little one the high-register scintillation of a music box.

Ravel slowed down as a composer during the First World War. Then, in the winter of 1919-20, given the seclusion of a friend's house in the Ardèche and the prompt of a commission from Diaghilev, he produced his 'choreographic poem' *La Valse*.

Diaghilev turned the piece down, remarking that what Ravel had produced was not a ballet but 'the painting of a ballet'. That judgement was astute. The score needs no dancers but only sound to convey corporeal energy and movement, and heady sensuality. To quote the composer's interpretation: 'Through whirling clouds light falls now and then on dancing couples. Little by little the clouds disperse, to reveal an immense salon filled with a mass of people revolving. The scene becomes progressively brighter. The light of chandeliers intensifies to a fortissimo. An imperial court around 1855.'

The crescendo of light, detail and rhythmic passion comes in two great waves, of which the second ends catastrophically. It is very possible that Ravel had in mind the Edgar Allan Poe story 'The Masque of the Red Death', in which a personification of pestilence arrives at a grand ball and all succumb. But the piece has also been widely understood as its composer's comment on the war, which had, in bringing a whole phase of European culture to an end, finished off the empire of Vienna.

As so often with Ravel, the keyboard version is not a whit inferior to the orchestral score in terms of power and colour. It may even add something of edgy brilliance and intensity.