

WIGMORE HALL

Friday 17 May 2024
7.30pm

Danny Driver piano

Robert Schumann (1810-1856)

Des Abends from *Fantasiestücke* Op. 12 (1837)

Gabriela Lena Frank (b.1972)

Nocturno Nazqueño (2014)

Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827)

Piano Sonata No. 14 in C sharp minor Op. 27 No. 2
'Moonlight' (1801)

*I. Adagio sostenuto • II. Allegretto • III. Presto
agitato*

Claude Debussy (1862-1918)

La soirée dans Grenade from *Estampes* (1903)

Aleksandr Skryabin (1872-1915)

Piano Sonata No. 9 in F Op. 68 'Black Mass' (1912-3)

Interval

Thomas Adès (b.1971)

Darkesse visible (1992)

Gabriel Fauré (1845-1924)

Nocturne No. 6 in D flat Op. 63 (1894)

Maurice Ravel (1875-1937)

Gaspard de la nuit (1908)

I. Ondine • II. Le gibet • III. Scarbo

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Humankind has been relentless in colonising evening's empire, a space once ruled by darkness yet now all too rarely free from artificial illumination. Danny Driver's programme embraces the myriad ways in which composers have responded to the mysterious, sometimes sinister, often sombre nature of the night. His nocturnal peregrination begins in a world of romantic reverie, embraces a sultry evening in Spain and a sublime vision of nature transformed by moonlight, and reaches the very gates of hell, that prison shrouded in 'utter darkness' wherein, as Milton imagined it in *Paradise Lost*, 'a great Furnace flam'd, yet from those flames/No light, but rather darkness visible'. Here is space for quiet contemplation of God and the Devil, a home to mystical visions, earthly pleasures and ineffable beauty.

Des Abends reflects the mindscape of one of **Schumann's** twin alter-egos, the dreamer Eusebius. The work, one of eight *Fantasiestücke* composed in 1837, drew its title and inspiration from a series of novels by ETA Hoffmann, the *Fantasiestücke in Callots Manier*, expressions of the radically creative power of the imagination. Its singing line evokes a portrait of evening's interplay of shadows and twilight. Traces of film noir suspense sound in **Gabriela Lena Frank's** *Nocturno Nazqueño*, present in its mercurial repeated notes and augmented fourths. The single-movement composition, written for the 2014 New York International Piano Competition, takes on a dreamlike quality, by turns wistful and feverish. Its central section, haunted by swarming, increasingly agitated figures in the right hand and Latin American rhythms in the left, yields to a recollection of the work's opening and a haunting fragmentary coda.

Beethoven's friends and enemies were united in their recognition of his exceptional gifts as a pianist. The opening movement of his 'Moonlight' Sonata – thus christened by one critic who said its shimmering stillness reminded him of the effects of moonlight on Lake Lucerne – is distinguished by its spellbinding simplicity, a profound example of the composer's gift to transform the barest of material into music of profound power and beauty. Beethoven indicated the use of the sustaining pedal in the work's manuscript and first edition with the emphatic directions *Con sordino* ('With dampers' or pedal) and *Senza sordino* ('Without dampers'), using both to create a sophisticated variety of tonal shadings.

Late in life, **Debussy** recalled what he had in mind while creating his three *Estampes* of 1903. They were the musical equivalent of an artist's prints, focused on a particular subject. 'An "estampe",' he wrote, 'is not a fresco, which I certainly didn't have in mind. And anyway, do we need a further 375 pages to make our feelings clear?' *La soirée dans Grenade*, the second of the *Estampes* trilogy, conjures an impression of nocturnal Spain with the habanera rhythm of its opening bars and shimmering octaves in the right hand. Andalusian warmth pervades the work's contrasting sections, including the languid, café-concert tune at its centre.

Skryabin's openness to the occult was, according to the Russian musicologist Leonid Sabaneev, central to the

composer's work: 'Undoubtedly, the entire spiritual and creative physiognomy of [his] consciousness was conditioned by Satanism,' observed Sabaneev. The Taoist concept of universal harmony and ancient Russian mysticism, however, were arguably more influential on Skryabin's philosophy than western ideas of the fallen angel. Whatever the nature of the composer's interest in the occult, his Ninth Piano Sonata of 1912-3 projects a sinister, often troubling soundworld. Its opening motif, stated in the right hand and echoed by the left, is built from consecutive tritone intervals, the so-called 'Devil in music'. The work's chromaticism, its technical demands and unsettling fervour directed Skryabin's friend Alexey Podgayetsky to refer to it as a 'Black Mass', the dark-hearted antithesis of the Seventh Piano Sonata, which the composer had subtitled 'White Mass'.

Described by its composer as 'an explosion of John Dowland's lute song *In Darknesse Let Mee Dwell* (1610)', **Thomas Ades's** *Darkness visible* rises from rhythmic and melodic ideas present in the original work. Adès dissects Dowland's composition to reveal the song's 'latent patterns ... with the aim of illuminating [it] from within, as if during the course of a performance.' The work unfolds as a meditation on the song's dark despair and its longing for a living death until 'death doe come'.

'Modern piano music that is a little interesting is an extremely rare thing,' wrote **Fauré** soon after completing the sixth of his 13 Nocturnes in the summer of 1894. The extraordinary invention, beguiling lyricism and arresting shifts of harmony, metre and mood of his new composition were rarer still. Its bold contrasts, more personal confession than nocturnal reverie, certainly set it apart from the nocturne as conceived by Chopin or John Field. A multitude of ideas arise in the piece, including the exquisite harp-like figurations that underpin the floating melody of its central section, before Fauré recalls the music of the opening.

Ravel's three tone poems for piano, collectively conceived in 1908 as *Gaspard de la nuit*, are distinguished by their abundant elegance. The cycle's overriding aesthetic, however, draws on the exotic imagery of the collection of poetry and prose by Aloysius Bertrand, posthumously published in 1842 as *Gaspard de la nuit* and introduced to Ravel in the 1890s by his friend, the pianist Ricardo Viñes. Bertrand's poems *Ondine* (describing the haunting song of a water-sprite), *Le gibet* (or 'The gibbet') and *Scarbo* (a portrait of a cunning dwarf) were published complete in the first edition of Ravel's work, underlining the close connection between literary and musical text. *Gaspard* perplexed many early performers and critics, hardly surprising given the triptych's diffuse musical language and technical challenges – way beyond the composer's grasp as a pianist. In the 1920s Ravel confessed to the pianist Vlado Perlemuter that he intended *Scarbo* as 'a caricature of romanticism', adding *sotto voce*, 'Maybe I got carried away'.

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