

WIGMORE HALL

Friday 17 November 2023
7.30pm

Llŷr Williams piano

Béla Bartók (1881-1945)

6 Romanian Folk Dances BB68 (1915)
*Stick Dance • Sash Dance • In One Spot •
Horn Dance • Romanian Polka • Fast Dance*

Fryderyk Chopin (1810-1849)

Polonaise in F sharp minor Op. 44 (1841)

Karol Szymanowski (1882-1937)

Mazurka Op. 50 No. 1 (1924-6)

Mazurka Op. 50 No. 2 (1924-6)

Mazurka Op. 50 No. 13 (1924-6)

Mazurka Op. 50 No. 14 (1924-6)

Béla Bartók

Piano Sonata BB88 (1926)
*I. Allegro moderato • II. Sostenuto e pesante •
III. Allegro molto*

Interval

Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky (1840-1893)

Dumka Op. 59 (1886)

Peter Warlock (1894-1930)

Folk Song Preludes (1917-8)
I. • II. • III. • IV. • V.

Isaac Albéniz (1860-1909)

Rondeña from *Iberia (Book 2)* (1907)

El polo from *Iberia (Book 3)* (1907)

Franz Liszt (1811-1886)

Hungarian Rhapsody No. 12 in C sharp minor S244 (1846-53)

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This evening's programme draws together music inspired by – and in many cases containing direct quotations from – the folk musics of many nations. Our composers were all also performers, and it is the creativity with which they approach their task that makes these pieces so compelling. 'Some people believe it is easier to write a transcription than an original work,' **Béla Bartók** reflected, 'perhaps because in a transcription a part of the job – the invention of themes – has already been done by somebody else. To the contrary... in order to write a good transcription, the composer must have creative imagination at his disposal as well, quite as much as in the writing of an original work.'

It is with Bartók that we begin, and his famous *6 Romanian Folk Dances*. Completed in 1915, these vivid, finely-characterised miniatures are as much shaped by Bartók's colourful accompaniments as they are by the melodies themselves. We are led from the proud formality of the opening piece to the scurrying *Sash Dance*, the swaying *In One Spot*, with its accompaniment of bare fifths; the impassioned, almost Romantic outpouring of *Horn Dance*, and two energetic concluding dances.

Fryderyk Chopin wrote many solo piano polonaises and mazurkas – the dance forms of his home country of Poland – during his years in Paris in the 1830s and 1840s. The F sharp minor *Polonaise* of 1841 is a brilliant double whammy: a polonaise on the outside, and a mazurka within. This explains the composer's description of the piece as 'a sort of Fantasy in the form of a Polonaise', and the tender major-key mazurka sits quietly within the work's grandly noble minor-key outer sections.

Chopin's fellow countryman **Karol Szymanowski** (born in what is now Ukraine) only came to experiment with using folk materials when he was in his 40s, declaring that he wished his music to be '*national* in its Polish characteristics, but not falter in striking to attain *universality*.' His *20 Mazurkas* Op. 50, composed between 1924 and 1926, feature many of the building blocks of 'lechitic' music – folk music from the Tatra mountains which Szymanowski had studied in some detail. The first *Mazurka* is accompanied by the bare fifths of a bagpipe drone; the second uses the pentatonic (five-note) scale and is full of percussive seconds, tapping out the rhythm of the dance. The thirteenth in the opus seems almost to drift in and out of focus: the drone bass appears and disappears under the weaving melody. The fourteenth feels perhaps the most reminiscent of Chopin – but listen out for its strange five-bar phrases which trip up the unprepared listener.

Moving from Polish to Hungarian bagpipes, we end our first half with a return to Bartók, and his three-movement Piano Sonata of 1926. Its heavily percussive, rhythmically unstable first movement is redolent of Stravinsky's *The Rite of Spring*, whilst the lively finale borrows from the stamping folk-like music of *Musettes* from his *Out of Doors* suite of the same year. Between these two comes a slow, angular middle movement; a lament in which

clashing harmonies between left and right hands are emphasised by contrapuntal imitation. The spirit of Bach, as well as that taste of Stravinsky, is never far away.

Whilst we tend to associate the 'dumka' form with Dvořák, this lament-cum-dance is a more broadly Slavonic genre. **Tchaikovsky's** *Dumka* of 1886, subtitled 'Scène Rustique Russe', was a rapidly dispatched commission from a Parisian publisher. The broad, doleful opening eventually gives way to ever livelier, flashier music; but we are thrown several times between slow and fast sections without a clear sense of where the story may end. It's not difficult to imagine a narrative lurking behind these constant changes of pace and mood.

Peter Warlock's *Folk Song Preludes* are based on Scottish and Welsh folk melodies. Warlock initially wrote at least nine pieces between 1917-8; but by the time they were published in 1923, only five remained. Critics found them baffling – 'an overdose of grinding discord and complication for mere complication's sake', as one rather waspishly put it. But they are richly evocative and highly colourful pieces, the harmonies seeming to border on jazz as they slip and slide beneath Scotch snaps and lilting melodies.

We conclude with music by two particularly starry virtuosos. **Isaac Albéniz** was a child prodigy and had toured Spain, Puerto Rico and Cuba by the time he was 15. He is perhaps best-known for his piano collection *Iberia*, a set of 12 pieces written from 1905-8, drawing largely on southern Spanish musical traditions. They are so technically challenging that even the composer considered some of them unplayable! But they also represent a fascinating musical diary of sorts, as Albéniz attempted to learn about, and then mimic, particular forms.

The *rondeña* is a flamenco genre named after the city of Ronda – but Albéniz's piece brings together various musical models, the jaunty opening theme contrasting with a mysterious, minor-key *copla* (as if sung). *El polo* is full of melancholy: the pianist is even instructed to play, at one point, 'always in the spirit of a sob'. But despite all this tragic weeping, the composer noted wryly on the manuscript that this *polo* 'should not be confused with the sport of the same name'.

We conclude with **Franz Liszt's** *Hungarian Rhapsody No. 12* – the twelfth of a set of 19 such pieces written across several decades. This work's themes are drawn from a series of earlier *Magyar dalok* ('Hungarian national melodies') in which he had earlier transcribed music he had heard during a visit to Hungary in 1839, strung together in fantastical sequence. The slow, strident opening and thunderous mini-cadenzas are gradually replaced by sparkling high-register dances and – of course – a barn-storming final section replete with musical fireworks to bring the audience to its feet.

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