

WIGMORE HALL

Tuesday 17 October 2023
7.30pm

Richard Goode piano

Johann Sebastian Bach (1685-1750) Partita No. 2 in C minor BWV826 (pub. 1726)
*Sinfonia • Allemande • Courante •
Sarabande • Rondeau • Capriccio*

Fryderyk Chopin (1810-1849) Mazurka in A minor Op. 59 No. 1 (1845)
Mazurka in A flat Op. 59 No. 2 (1845)
Mazurka in F sharp minor Op. 59 No. 3 (1845)

Gabriel Fauré (1845-1924) Barcarolle No. 3 in G flat Op. 42 (1885)
Nocturne No. 3 in A flat Op. 33 No. 3 (1883)
Nocturne No. 6 in D flat Op. 63 (1894)

Interval

Fryderyk Chopin Piano Sonata No. 3 in B minor Op. 58 (1844)
*I. Allegro maestoso • II. Scherzo. Molto vivace •
III. Largo • IV. Finale. Presto non tanto*

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Bach's first-ever publication was the set of six Partitas Op. 1, more often called *Clavier-Übung* ('Keyboard Practice'), which came out bit by bit in Leipzig between 1726 and 1731, by which time he was 46. They are varied in form, with a common core of *Allemande*, *Courante* and *Sarabande*, preceded by, respectively, a *Prelude*, *Sinfonia*, *Fantasia*, *Ouverture* and *Praeambulum*, and usually concluded by a *Gigue*. Before the *Gigue* comes a pair of *galanteries*, again very varied, with titles like *Burlesca* and *Scherzo*. In the D major Partita, the 'extra' movements are placed either side of the *Sarabande*, while in the case of the C minor Partita, the *galanteries* are so developed that they displace the *Gigue* all together. Bach was clearly out to impress with the formal variety of his Op. 1.

Chopin only really got going with mazurkas after he'd left Poland for good. At the time of the Warsaw Uprising against the colonial Russians in November 1830, he happened to be in Vienna, and he never managed to get back home. The most significant thing about the mazurkas he began to write, stuck in Vienna, was that they were not polonaises. The polonaise was the smart-society Polish dance, the one that was welcome in the concert hall, suitably perfumed. Even Bach wrote that sort of polonaise. But the mazurka, much more suspect and folksy, became Chopin's private Poland: and once he'd settled in Paris, it marked him as an Eastern Exotic.

Chopin's own playing of his mazurkas bewildered everyone. Hector Berlioz lamented: 'Virtually nobody but Chopin himself can play his music and give it this unusual turn, this sense of the unexpected There are unbelievable details in his Mazurkas; and he has found how to make them doubly interesting by playing them with the utmost degree of softness, *piano* in the extreme, the hammers merely brushing the strings, so that one is tempted to go close to the instrument and put one's ear to it as if to a concert of sylphs or elves.' Lovely to imagine Berlioz, of all people, being captivated by *very quiet piano music*.

Wilhelm von Lenz studied the mazurkas with Chopin, and told of the opera composer Meyerbeer bursting in upon one of his lessons. "That's in 2/4", said Meyerbeer. Chopin beat triple time on the piano with his pencil, his eyes blazing. "2/4", repeated Meyerbeer. "It's in 3/4", shouted Chopin, who rarely raised his voice above a murmur. He played, counting aloud, and stamping the beat with his foot, but Meyerbeer stuck to his guns, and they parted on bad terms'. Charles Hallé was obviously not so annoying as Meyerbeer, because he once counted 4-in-a-bar while Chopin played mazurkas, and Chopin only laughed.

But he increasingly despaired of getting anyone to understand how to play his music. He ceased to use the word *rubato* after spending a day with

Mendelssohn in 1835. As Liszt explained, 'the term taught nothing to those who did not know, understand, and feel'. Chopin himself put it more bluntly: 'there are perhaps only four people [*two of whom we have just mentioned*] who would understand – the rest would play it just as badly as now'.

Fauré must have wished that he and Chopin had overlapped a little more. He arrived to study in Paris at the early age of nine, missing by five years the man whose elusive pianistic style he was to develop for himself. He composed 13 nocturnes and 13 barcarolles, as well as some valse-caprices and a mazurka. Fauré's son Philippe tells us that his father was not really happy with such generic titles – he would have preferred 'Piano Piece number ... whatever' – but his publishers insisted. The young Aaron Copland, then studying in Paris, surveyed Fauré's work for the *Musical Quarterly*, the article appearing aptly just before Fauré's death. 'It was with the Sixth Nocturne that Fauré first fully emerged from the shadow of the great Pole', wrote the 24-year-old, and went on to quote Alfred Cortot: 'There are few pages in all music comparable to these'. Copland's concluding peroration – 'the world at large has particular need of Gabriel Fauré today; need of his calm, his naturalness, his restraint, his optimism' – suggests that not much has changed in a hundred years.

Of Chopin's three piano sonatas, the last (in B minor) is the real one. The first was a student-ish attempt in the significant Beethoven key of C minor: the second, in B flat minor, was written around rather a good Funeral March that Chopin had prepared earlier. But in the summer of 1844, he was a mature and successful artist deliberately writing a sonata from scratch. Now, what is it that differentiates a sonata from a 'string of pieces'? An over-riding unity, surely, a meaning – and a meaning for the whole of each movement, and for the whole piece. What this sonata's about, at the simplest level, is falling and then climbing back up again. And it uses other means of unification. For instance, the first movement ends on a B major chord with a D sharp at the top. The *Scherzo* takes that D sharp, calls it an E flat, and sets off in the key of E flat major. The slow movement turns it back into a D sharp, and the *Finale* does what a sonata finale should, when it somehow reaches an E flat chord (from B minor!), allowing player and listeners to muse on their musical journey. Both second and third movements have huge middle sections which can easily overbalance the form – careful tempo selection is more than usually crucial to this delicate formal tightrope.

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