

# WIGMORE HALL 125

Saturday 18 October 2025  
7.30pm

This concert is supported by Pauline and Ian Howat

Steven Osborne piano

Robert Schumann (1810-1856)

Papillons Op. 2 (1830-1)

*Introduzione • No. 1 • No. 2: Prestissimo • No. 3 •  
No. 4: Presto • No. 5 • No. 6 • No. 7: Semplice • No. 8 •  
No. 9: Prestissimo • No. 10: Vivo • No. 11 • No. 12: Finale*

Erik Satie (1866-1925)

Gymnopédie No. 3 (1888)

Lili Boulanger (1893-1918)

D'un jardin clair from 3 *Morceaux* (1914)

Anatoly Lyadov (1855-1914)

Musical Snuffbox Op. 32 (1893)

Fritz Kreisler (1875-1962)

Liebesleid (1910) *arranged by Sergey Rachmaninov*

Maurice Ravel (1875-1937)

Valses nobles et sentimentales (1911)

*I. Modéré, très franc • II. Assez lent, avec une expression  
intense • III. Modéré • IV. Assez animé • V. Presque lent,  
dans un sentiment intime • VI. Vif • VII. Moins vif •  
VIII. Epilogue. Lent*

*Interval*

Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827)

33 Variations in C on a waltz by Diabelli Op. 120 (1819-23)



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The aesthetic of the fragment was a preoccupation of the early Romantics, and not just in music. **Schumann's** *Papillons*, Op. 2, completed in 1831 when he was 21 years old, is characteristic, presenting an assemblage of 12 discrete and mostly epigrammatic sound images that are juxtaposed to create a larger constellation. This work was the prototype for later collections such as *Carnaval* and *Kreisleriana*, and it really constitutes a succession of dance pieces (mainly waltzes, but with two polonaises) and a few short, lyrical character pieces. The inspiration was Jean Paul's unfinished novel *Flegeljahre*, and although Schumann did not specify a programme as such, he did suggest in correspondence that the intention was to depict the masked ball that crowns the final scene of the novel. Modern scholarship has rendered the connection between the music and the novel more specific, right down to the depiction of a love triangle and its dénouement, but this is largely incidental to our appreciation of the music. It is worth noting that the more lyrical moments allow Schumann to thin out the keyboard texture, in contrast to the more characteristic chordal and often mono-rhythmic piano style employed elsewhere. The work as a whole is end-weighted, with the last three pieces longer and more multi-sectional than the earlier ones, and with the final piece recalling earlier moments in a gesture of synthesis, as well as introducing a pictorial detail, the chiming of the clock as the masked ball draws to a close.

Linking **Erik Satie** and **Lili Boulanger** in the group of four miniatures that follows *Papillons* in this evening's programme was an astute move. The 'pared down' idiom of Satie's early piano works, including the third of his *Gymnopédies* of 1888, established a direction for several younger French composers keen to eschew late-romantic excesses in favour of an ideal of classical poise and purity. The understated harmonic innovations in this music had a liberating effect on Debussy, among others, and commentators have noted that they also influenced Lili Boulanger, whose early death robbed us of one of the most promising composers of her generation. 'D'un jardin clair' was composed in 1914, while Boulanger was a student in Rome, and we might locate its delicate, non-assertive musings somewhere between the austere simplicity of Satie's *Gymnopédies* and Debussy's rather warmer tone-painting. The term 'impressionism' is over-used in music, but it does at least point to some of the relevant associations. In the other two miniatures we return to the waltz, the underlying theme of this programme. It is the waltz that links the playful take on a mechanical music box in **Anatoly Lyadov's** beautifully executed confection of 1893, and the glorious Rachmaninov arrangement (1931) of **Kreisler's** much-loved *Liebesleid* (Love's Sorrow), originally composed for violin and piano as a lingering, affectionate portrait of the fading world of Viennese coffee houses.

**Ravel** conceived the idea of a musical tribute to the waltz in 1906 in an unfinished piece called *Wien*

[Vienna]. It was a precursor to his orchestral masterpiece *La Valse*, which was completed in 1920. Between these two dates, he composed his *Valses nobles et sentimentales*. It was completed in 1911, as a linked chain of eight waltzes for piano, the version we hear in this concert. The title of the work is a homage to Schubert's waltzes, signalling the historical moment when this genre first defined itself against a variety of rather similar so-called 'German dances', before it conquered Europe in aristocratic ballrooms, bourgeois salons, and eventually commercial dance halls. It is hard to resist viewing these three 'waltz moments' in Ravel as a collective gesture of nostalgia for a disappearing world. But in any event *Valses nobles et sentimentales* was by no means his only work to look to the past, and it exhibits a discreet neo-classicism in which there is a recognisable background of diatonic harmony distorted by 'tonal interferences'. These latter usually take the form of added notes, as in the clashing chords of the opening waltz, which were by no means welcomed by contemporary audiences. Indeed, the work as a whole was widely castigated on its first performance on 8 May 1911. In broad terms, the separate pieces juxtapose slow waltzes, with that plangent tone so characteristic of Ravel, with high-tempo ones. The contrast is at its most extreme in the last two pieces, with the final waltz functioning as an extended epilogue.

An inauspicious waltz theme by Anton Diabelli was the prompt for one of the truly great variation sets in music. Originally Diabelli invited several composers to contribute a variation each, but **Beethoven** – over a period of several years, between 1819 and 1823 – composed no fewer than 33, and they marked a significant departure from classical variation form. Already in his early piano sonatas Beethoven had revealed a capacity to build extended development sections by extracting and working unpromising details drawn from the exposition, and this skill was sublimated in his *Diabelli Variations*. Often enough we lose sight of the original theme – as the late Alfred Brendel memorably put it, 'the theme has ceased to reign over its unruly offspring' – but each component of Diabelli's waltz, whether an interval, an ornament, or a gesture, is mined and turned to constructive use. Not only is the work a compendium of keyboard writing, with explicit references to earlier masters, notably Bach and Mozart; it is also a triumph of architecture, with the variations grouped into larger formal units, and with the principle of repetition, central to variation sets, constructively at odds with a powerful, goal-directed teleology. This reaches its culmination in the closing moments, as a deeply expressive, Bachian 'slow movement' segues into a monumental tension-building fugue, and then a final tension-releasing minuet.

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