

# WIGMORE HALL

Saturday 19 October 2024  
7.30pm

Alexandre Tharaud piano

Johann Sebastian Bach (1685-1750) Chorus from *St Matthew Passion* BWV244 (1727 rev. 1736-46)  
*transcribed by Alexandre Tharaud*

Siciliano from *Flute Sonata in E flat* BWV1031 (after 1740)  
*transcribed by Gottfried Galston*

Suite in A minor BWV818a (?1720-2)  
*I. Prelude • II. Allemande • III. Courante • IV. Sarabande •  
V. Menuet • VI. Gigue*

Aus Liebe will mein Heiland sterben from *St Matthew Passion*  
BWV244 *transcribed by Alexandre Tharaud*

From *Suite in E minor* BWV996 (c.1715) *transcribed by Alexandre  
Tharaud*  
*Praeludio • Allemande • Bourrée • Sarabande • Gigue*

Siciliano from *Organ Concerto in D minor* BWV596 (1713-4)  
*transcribed by Alexandre Tharaud*

*Interval*

Maurice Ravel (1875-1937) *Miroirs* (1904-5)  
*Noctuelles • Oiseaux tristes • Une barque sur l'océan •  
Alborada del gracioso • La vallée des cloches*

Paul Dukas (1865-1935) *The Sorcerer's Apprentice* (1897) *transcribed by Alexandre  
Tharaud*

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There's less difference between **Alexandre Tharaud** and a grandmother than one might think. To clarify: the grandmother in question is the one from Marcel Proust's *In Search of Lost Time*. She wished for her grandson to have 'photographs of the most beautiful monuments or landscapes' in his room. However, to avoid the 'commercial banality' of such photographs, she preferred to see if a great painter had already depicted them. She favoured works like *The Cathedral of Chartres* by Camille Corot or *Vesuvius in Eruption* by Turner, believing, as she said, that they added 'an extra degree of art'. It's this extra degree of art that we find in Alexandre Tharaud's piano transcriptions, performed in the intimate 'chamber' setting of Wigmore Hall. These pieces, originally composed for orchestra or various instruments such as the lute or organ, are meticulously tailored by the performer to best suit his hand and sensitivity.

The opening *Chorus* from the *St Matthew Passion*, the first 'monument' transcribed by Alexandre Tharaud, is one of the most imposing. **Johann Sebastian Bach** creates a dialogue between two choirs, placed at opposite ends of the nave in the St Thomas Church in Leipzig, immersing the listener in an extraordinary sonic and spiritual stereophony. The effect of this chorus was so theatrical that, in 1729, a woman in the Leipzig audience reportedly stood up, shouting, 'Protect your children, Lord! It's as if we were in an opera'.

The programme continues with this dramatic energy. While the plaintive lyricism of the Flute Sonata BWV1031 seems like an extension of the *Chorus*, it is the aria *Aus Liebe will mein Heiland sterben* that draws us back to the path of the *Passion*. The piano transcription omits the text, though it is central to the musical expression. In the first theme, a long held note emphasises the word *Liebe* ('love'). At the end of the piece, twice, the voice seems to expire on *Sterben* ('to die') before gathering itself once again.

Only the two Suites offer some moments of brightness. The first, written for harpsichord, is rarely performed, yet it has nothing to envy the great collections of Bach's Suites. The second, traditionally attributed to the lute, is famously unplayable – by lutenists, that is. This has led to the theory that it may have been intended for the Lautenwerk, a smaller harpsichord strung with gut strings, like the lute. Passionate about this instrument, Bach is said to have drawn up plans for it, though they've since been lost.

Listening to Alexandre Tharaud's transcriptions, it becomes clear that transcribing is already a form of interpretation. An extreme case arises with the *Siciliano* for organ (BWV596), which is itself a transcription of Vivaldi's *L'Estro armonico*! Bach was

just over 20 years old when he discovered these violin concertos in the Weimar library. He produced several transcriptions, in which the keyboard mimics the textures of the orchestra, a study that would later lead to works like the *Italian Concerto*. Here, a first section played by the full orchestra in Vivaldi's version presents chords that the bass tries to pull downward. The texture then lightens, allowing the solo instrument's laments to emerge, before the opening *tutti* returns.

The first piece of *Miroirs* is dedicated to Léon-Paul Fargue, who wrote about night moths (*noctuelles*) in one of his poems. In **Ravel's** hands, their flight is quickly wrapped in a mysterious tension, created by the syncopated, obsessive repetition of a single note.

Ravel envisioned his *Oiseaux tristes* as small creatures 'lost in the torpor of a very dark forest, in the heat of a summer day'. Their solitary songs echo in a quiet, deserted atmosphere.

The first measures of *Une barque sur l'océan* were sketched by the composer on a gouache painting by D Arguylrely depicting a three-masted ship sailing on calm seas. However, the piece later evokes more of Hokusai's *The Great Wave off Kanagawa*, another of Ravel's influences, with its tempestuous and menacing waves.

*Alborada del gracioso* is a stylisation of flamenco, too sharp to be taken seriously. You can hear the typical guitar technique of *rasgueado* as well as the clicking of dancers' heels. But a buffoon (*gracioso*) interrupts the celebration to sing an aubade (*alborada*) to an indifferent beauty. Once the buffoon leaves, the dance resumes, even more frenzied than before.

Ravel intended for his *Miroirs* to be 'free enough to seem improvised'. *La vallée des cloches* closes this aesthetic ideal, with the piano searching for metallic resonances that it lets patiently fade.

The plot of *The Sorcerer's Apprentice*, based on Goethe's ballad, is well known. A young sorcerer, seeking rest, enchants a broom to fill a basin with water. But the broom doesn't stop. Its pace becomes so frantic that it floods the room. The apprentice, trying to solve the problem by chopping the broom with an axe, only makes matters worse. Only the return of the master restores order. While the fable seems childish, it conceals a political message. This is clear in the original text by Lucian of Samosata, a Roman satirist of the 2nd Century, whom Goethe essentially transcribed: the broom, 'this peculiar kind of slave', could one day lead a rebellion that axes would only intensify.

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