

# WIGMORE HALL

Monday 1 May 2023  
1.00pm

Tom Borrow piano

Johann Sebastian Bach (1685-1750) Italian Concerto in F BWV971 (pub. 1735)  
*I. [Allegro] • II. Andante • III. Presto*

César Franck (1822-1890) Prélude, choral et fugue (1884)  
*I. Prélude. Moderato • II. Choral. Poco più lento • III. Fugue. Tempo I*

Sergey Rachmaninov (1873-1943) Variations on a Theme of Corelli Op. 42 (1931)



This concert is being broadcast on BBC Radio 3

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Musicians have always remade the past. The process may involve recycling melodies, enhancing familiar forms, building new works on the foundations of old compositions or other transformative strategies. Today's programme recalls three ways in which composers gave fresh creative impetus to existing musical ideas. Those ideas were drawn from the recent past in the case of the so-called *Italian Concerto*. **Bach** here absorbs elements of the concertos of Vivaldi, which he had known since the early 1710s, and comparable pieces by his younger contemporaries, Johann Gottlieb Graun, his brother Carl Heinrich and Johann Joachim Quantz among them, and embellishes them with melodic ornaments that appear to be more German than Italian in character. The composer and music theorist Johann Adolph Scheibe, writing in 1739, concluded that Bach's concerto for solo keyboard 'will be imitated all in vain by foreigners', underlining the work's status as a model of German ingenuity.

Bach chose the *Concerto nach Italienischem Gusto* ('Concerto after the Italian taste') to open the second volume of his *Clavierübung* ('Keyboard Practice') pieces, published in Nuremberg in 1735. The work, which stands as companion to the *Overture in the French style* BWV831, embraces the spirit of the Italian instrumental concerto. Its original conception for two-manual harpsichord invited the player to emulate the textural and timbral contrasts between tutti and solo passages in the Italianate concerto. The interaction between 'solo' and 'tutti' writing runs through the ritornello sections of the two outer movements, both cast in simple A-B-A form; it is at its clearest, however, in the exquisite central *Andante*, where the right hand carries a florid counterpoint to an affecting Vivaldian melody carried in the left hand's stepwise chord progressions.

**César Franck** made his mark as a pianist during his late teens and composed a series of showpieces for the instrument that graced his subsequent career as a virtuoso performer. Hostile reviews penned by the critic of the *Gazette musicale*, loss-making concerts and marriage led Franck to exchange the recital room for the relative safety of the organ loft, at first at St-Jean-St-François in the Marais district of Paris, then at the recently completed Ste Clotilde, which he served as organist for 30 years. Having placed the piano in the limelight in his Quintet (1879), he turned to the instrument again during his strikingly productive final decade. According to his biographer Léon Vallas, Franck's love for the works of Bach led him to adopt the formula of 'Prelude and Fugue' familiar in *The Well-tempered Clavier* as the starting point for his *Prélude, choral et fugue* for solo piano, composed during the summer of 1884. He separated prelude from fugue to create a musical triptych by inserting a central chorale, imbuing each movement with the heightened romantic expression and harmonic complexities that so outraged conservative critics of his music, his wife among them.

Franck surrounds the strong introductory theme of the *Prélude* with an elaborate accompaniment of arpeggios and uses their interplay to generate the movement's expressive intensity. It is followed by a new yet related theme, the yearning quality of which calls to mind the music of Brahms. The movement, which grows from the material of both themes and their accompanying arpeggios, pivots on two modulatory chords into the *Choral*, shifting the tonality abruptly from B minor to C minor. Towering arpeggiated chords require the top line to be played by the left hand, adding to the presence and power of Franck's chromatic chorale melody and its sonorous harmonisation. The first movement's Brahmsian theme is recalled towards the close of the *Choral* to serve as a bridge to the *Fugue* and supply the opening notes of a highly chromatic fugue subject.

Soon after landing in New York in 1918 as an exile from revolutionary Russia, **Rachmaninov** received a visit from the violinist Fritz Kreisler. The two men became friends, performing and recording as a duo and reflecting their mutual appreciation in transcriptions of each other's compositions. In May 1931, Rachmaninov began writing a set of variations for solo piano. It appears likely that Kreisler supplied the work's theme. Rachmaninov reciprocated by dedicating his new score to Kreisler. The *Variations on a Theme of Corelli*, completed on 19 June 1931 at the composer's rented holiday villa in Clairefontaine-en-Yvelines, south-west of Paris, open with an unadorned statement of the first 16 bars of Arcangelo Corelli's Violin Sonata No. 12 in D minor Op. 5 of c.1700, itself based on the anonymous 'folia' melodic and harmonic framework.

Within the span of 20 short variations, Rachmaninov evolves and gradually deconstructs his chosen theme using a dazzling array of melodic, harmonic and modal elaborations. 'All this mad running about is necessary in order to efface the theme,' he told the composer and musicologist Alfred J Swan while playing his variations. When he had finished he looked at his hands and said, 'The blood-vessels on my fingertips have begun to burst; bruises are forming'. Although Rachmaninov suggested that the damage was probably the consequence of old age, many younger pianists have been wounded while negotiating his Corelli variations. The work's dashing display and pianistic fireworks follow four slow variations and are punctuated by the introspective meditation of Variation 8, the 'misterioso' nature of which flows from its meandering chromatic bass line, and two andante variations, the second of which is cast in the remote key of D flat major. The work's coda, noted Swan at first hearing, is 'neither a climax nor a return to the beginning'; rather, it transcends what has gone before, reconciling minor and major tonalities to create an atmosphere of calm concentration.

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