

WIGMORE HALL

Wednesday 1 September 2021 6.00pm

Paul Lewis piano

Felix Mendelssohn (1809-1847)

Song without Words in E Op. 19b No. 1 (1830)
Song without Words in G minor Op. 53 No. 3 (1839)
Song without Words in E flat Op. 53 No. 2 (1835)
Song without Words in A minor Op. 19b No. 2 (1830)
Song without Words in E Op. 30 No. 3 (1834)

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (1756-1791)

Piano Sonata in A K331 (1781-3)
I. Tema con variazione • II. Menuetto & trio • III. Alla Turca

Interval

Aleksandr Skryabin (1872-1915)

5 Preludes Op. 74 (1914)
Douloureux, déchirant • Très lent, contemplatif • Allegro drammatico • Lent, vague, indécis • Fier, belliqueux

Modest Musorgsky (1839-1881)

Pictures from an Exhibition (1874)
Promenade 1 • The Gnome • Promenade 2 • The Old Castle • Promenade 3 • Tuileries • Bydlo • Promenade 4 • Ballet of the Unhatched Chicks • "Samuel" Goldenberg und "Schmuyle" • Promenade 5 • The Market Place at Limoges • Catacombs (Sepulchrum Romanum) • Cum mortuis in lingua mortua • The Hut on Fowl's Legs (Baba-Yaga) • The Great Gate of Kiev

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In Victorian England, **Mendelssohn** was revered to the point of adulation, above all for the oratorio *Elijah* and the eight volumes of *Lieder ohne Worte*, or 'Songs without Words'. Published at intervals from 1832, these lyrics are marked by Mendelssohn's elegant craftsmanship and his gift for shapely melody that cunningly avoids the banal or the obvious. Not for nothing did Schumann dub him 'the Mozart of the nineteenth century'.

Opening the first book of 'Songs', Op. 19b, the dulcet E major and the wistful A minor both have that essential Mendelssohnian quality of innocence. Mendelssohn originally called the third of the Op. 53 book *Gondellied*, before suppressing the title, doubtless realising that no Venetian gondolier could have withstood the tsunami conjured by this driving *Presto agitato*. Composed for Schumann's future bride Clara Wieck, Op. 53 No. 2 begins as an ardent song, then develops into a passionate duet between left and right hands.

Finally in this group, Op. 30 No. 3 is the kind of Mendelssohn piece too readily sentimentalised, as, we can guess, it often was in Victorian parlours. The composer adds a cautionary '*non troppo*' to his *Adagio* marking, and in sympathetic hands it emerges as a gentle, unpretentious partsong reimagined in keyboard terms.

With the Ottomans now at a safe distance, music evoking Turkish Janissary bands was all the rage in late 18th-century Vienna. In the early 1780s **Mozart** capitalised on the vogue in *Die Entführung aus dem Serail* and the *rondo 'Alla turca'* finale of the Sonata in A K331, probably dating from 1783. Alternating A minor mystery and A major flamboyance, the *rondo* quickly became a Mozartian popular hit. Its Janissary imitations - cymbals, drums and triangle - would have been even more raucous with the percussion stop available on some early fortepianos.

Mozart prefaces his 'Turkish Rondo' with a set of variations on a lulling nursery tune (*Andante grazioso*) and an extended minuet and trio. The upshot is his only keyboard sonata without a movement in sonata form. The first movement's variations explore an inventive range of textures: say, in the hand-crossings and sensuous parallel thirds of variation four, or the swashbuckling final variation, with its foretaste of the *rondo 'Alla turca'*. Opening with a suggestion of horn fanfares, the central minuet mingles the ceremonial and the lyrical, while the trio recreates the dulcet textures, complete with hand-crossings, of variation four in the *Andante grazioso*.

'I want to illuminate the world with light.' 'I create all history as I create all future.' Born into an aristocratic Moscow family, **Aleksandr Skryabin** redefined megalomania, both in his personality and in the mystical-erotic extravagance of orchestral works like *Le poème de l'extase*. A child prodigy pianist, he was also a master of the intense keyboard miniature. His many sets of keyboard preludes are descendants of Chopin's fleeting preludes, with a nod to his French contemporary Debussy.

Dating from 1914, the five Preludes Op. 74 are the last works Skryabin completed before his sudden death from blood poisoning.

Each conjures a febrile vision within a tiny span. No. 1, marked 'painful, heartrending', dwells obsessively on a rising semitone figure that evokes Wagner's *Tristan*. Of the equally claustrophobic No. 2, saturated by falling semitones, Skryabin wrote: 'Here is fatigue, exhaustion...all eternity, millions of years...'

After the nightmarish third prelude, exploding immediately to an anguished climax ('comme un cri'), the nebulous No. 4 ('vague, indecisive') pushes harmony to the brink of incoherence. The final prelude ('proud and bellicose') revives the tumult of No. 3 with torrents of arpeggios against an insistent bass ostinato. In the final bars the arpeggios tumble to the depths, the harmonies unresolved to the last.

The stimulus for **Musorgsky's** famous piano work was an exhibition in St Petersburg early in 1874 to commemorate the work of the architect, stage designer and painter Victor Hartmann, a close friend of the composer. A few months later, after the premiere of *Boris Godunov*, Musorgsky informed the exhibition's organiser Vladimir Stasov that 'Hartmann is boiling as Boris boiled - and sounds have hung in the air, and I am now gulping and overheating...I can hardly manage to scribble it down on paper.'

Musorgsky's suite consists of ten 'pictures' and an introductory *Promenade* which recurs in varied form. On its first appearance the *Promenade* alternates a solo line and a harmonised response - an allusion both to Russian folksong and to Orthodox chant. Of the *Promenade's* varied reappearances Stasov wrote: 'The composer has shown himself pacing here and there; sometimes lingering, sometimes hastening to get near a picture; sometimes the joyful gait slackens - Musorgsky thinking of his dead friend.'

The 'pictures' themselves cover a vast range of textures and expression, from the delicate, mercurial *Tuileries* (Hartmann had spent several years in France) and the gossamer *Ballet of the Unhatched Chicks* (inspired by costume designs for a children's ballet) to the ghostly *Catacombs*, where Musorgsky quotes Siegfried's Funeral March from *Götterdämmerung*. The first 'picture', *Gnomus*, was prompted by Hartmann's design for a toy nutcracker. Going beyond the visual image, Musorgsky makes the gnome both playfully grotesque and sinister. In *Il vecchio castello* an Italian troubador sings a melancholy *siciliano*, while *Bydło* ('cattle') graphically portrays the heavy thud of an ox-cart.

The Great Gate of Kiev that crowns the suite was inspired by Hartmann's design for a grand gateway that was never built. Alternating a sonorous chorale and the Orthodox burial chant, Musorgsky's magnificent tableau brings the work full circle by harking back to the opening *Promenade*.

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