WIGMORE HALL 125

Saturday 20 December 2025
7.30pm

Isata Kanneh-Mason piano

Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827)	Piano Sonata No. 14 in C sharp minor Op. 27 No. 2 'Moonlight' (1801) *I. Adagio sostenuto • II. Allegretto • III. Presto agitato*
Maurice Ravel (1875-1937)	Gaspard de la nuit (1908) *I. Ondine. Lent • II. Le gibet. Très lent •* *III. Scarbo. Modéré*
	Interval
Dobrinka Tabakova (b.1980)	Nocturne (2008)
	Halo (1999) *I. From Darkness • II. To Blinding Shine •* *III. Calm and Settled Glow*
Ludwig van Beethoven	Piano Sonata No. 21 in C Op. 53 'Waldstein' (1803-4) *I. Allegro con brio • II. Introduzione. Adagio molto •* *III. Rondo. Allegretto moderato – Prestissimo*

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Beethoven's own subtitle for his Piano Sonata No. 14 in C sharp minor, Op. 27 No. 2 (1801), was 'quasi una fantasia', and certainly its opening movement – marked *adagio sostenuto* – has stirred the fancy of its many listeners. Beethoven's pupil, Carl Czerny, heard it as 'a night scene, in which the plaintive voice of a spirit is heard far in the distance.' But the most famous description originates in a short story by the German poet and music critic, Ludwig Rellstab. Published in 1824, Rellstab's 'Theodor' includes a scene in which a character imagines listening to the sonata's opening *Adagio*: 'The lake rests in the twilit glimmer of the moon, dull waves strike the dark shore; woeful wooded mountains rise up, isolating the holy ground from the world; swans glide with whispering rustles like ghosts on the tide, and an Aeolian harp sends down tones of lonely, melancholy love from the ruins.' It was not long before the sonata acquired its nickname of 'Moonlight', an echo of the Romantic era's fascination with night, dreams and the subjective world of the subconscious – not to mention a winning strategy on the part of Beethoven's astute publishers. The opening movement is so famous, that the second-movement *Allegretto* can come as something of a shock. Short and succinct, it feels like a self-conscious allusion to the graceful world of the 18th Century – Liszt felt that it represented 'a flower between two chasms.' The *Presto agitato* that concludes the sonata returns to the turbulent emotional world of romanticism. Stormy and impassioned, its flowing arpeggios are constantly interrupted by jagged *sforzando* markings. If the opening movement depicts a scene of nocturnal stillness, the finale feels like blizzard, descending violently and unpredictably from the mountain tops.

Like many turn-of-the-century French musicians, **Ravel** adored Russian music, which he saw as an antidote to the solemnity of the Austro-German classics, especially in the decades after France's defeat in the Franco-Prussian War of 1870-1. He learned much from the colourful orchestral scores of Balakirev, Borodin and Rimsky-Korsakov, as well as from virtuoso piano works such as Musorgsky's *Pictures from an Exhibition* (which he famously orchestrated in 1922). Indeed, 'Scarbo', the third movement of *Gaspard de la nuit* (1908) was intended to be yet more difficult than Balakirev's fiendish *Islamey*. As Ravel confessed: 'perhaps I let myself get carried away!' *Gaspard de la nuit* is, though, not just the product of Ravel's musical predilections; it records a whole series of literary and visual influences too. Based on a collection of prose poems by the French romantic poet, Aloysius Bertrand, it breathes the gothic air as the tales of Edgar Allen Poe. Bertrand's collection was subtitled *Fantasies à la manière de Rembrandt et de Callot*, two 17th-century artists who represented contrasting facets of human nature – one philosophical and contemplative, the other swaggering and rumbustious. Ravel claimed that 'my ambition is to say with notes what a poet expresses with words'. In 'Ondine', he summons up the spirit of Bertrand's seductive water sprite, who tries – yet fails – to lure the poet into joining her as the king of her aquatic realm. In 'Le gibet', Ravel matches Bertrand's melancholy evocation of 'the bell that tolls by the walls of a city under the horizon, and the corpse of a hanged man, reddened by the setting sun.' And in 'Scarbo', he depicts the iridescent movements of a demonic goblin 'pirouetting on a single foot and whirling around the room like a spindle that has fallen from a witch's distaff.'

Born in the Bulgarian town of Plovdiv, **Dobrinka Tabakova** has made London her home since 1991. *Nocturne*, which dates from 2008, is a short, lyric evocation of the stillness of night, untroubled by the kind of anxious nightmares and subconscious terrors evoked by Ravel. Unmistakably contemporary in spirit, the rolling arpeggios of Tabakova's miniature perhaps also hark back to the 19th-century nocturnes of Chopin and Field. *Halo*, written in 1999, comprises three movements: 'From Darkness', 'To Blinding Shine', and 'Calm and Settled Glow'. As Tabakova herself writes: 'The inspiration for this suite came from a beautiful halo which had formed around the moon one summer's night. Exploring a range of techniques for achieving harmonics on the piano, the piece describes a hypothetical life of a halo. The first movement sees its birth from darkness, in the second the full strength of light is evoked through rapid repetitive figures, and the extreme registers of the piano; and the final movement portrays a mature and settled halo.'

Unlike the 'Moonlight' sonata, the nickname of the Piano Sonata No. 21 in C, Op. 53, came from the composer himself. Published in May 1805, it was dedicated to **Beethoven**'s friend and patron, Count Ferdinand von Waldstein. The sonata is, though, sometimes known as *L'Aurora* (The Dawn), concluding this evening's musical journey from nighttime to the break of day. Like the juxtaposition of Callot and Rembrandt in *Gaspard de la Nuit*, the 'Moonlight' and the 'Waldstein' sonatas constitute a diptych of contrasting moods and personalities (albeit one that Beethoven did not intend as such). Both sonatas have expansive outer movements that frame a short, enigmatic middle movement. There, however, the similarities end. The home key of the 'Moonlight' sonata was C sharp minor, by turns spectral and melodramatic. In the outer movements of the 'Waldstein', by contrast, a confident and radiant C major prevails. And if the 'Moonlight' (or at least its first movement) soon became a parlour favourite of 19th-century amateur pianists, the 'Waldstein' pushes the pianist – and the piano itself – right to the edge of their technical possibilities. Beethoven's 19th-century biographer, Wilhelm von Lenz, described it as 'a heroic symphony for piano', and heroism is indeed its watchword.