

WIGMORE HALL

Wednesday 20 November 2024
7.30pm

Jonathan Powell piano

Egon Kornauth (1891-1959)

Fantasia Op. 10 (1915)

Karol Szymanowski (1882-1937)

Métopes Op. 29 (1915)

L'île des sirènes • Calypso • Nausicaa

Felix Blumenfeld (1863-1931)

Sonata-Fantasia Op. 46 (1913)

*I. Allegro non tanto • II. Andante poetico •
III. Tempo d'andante - Allegro con fuoco*

Interval

Alban Berg (1885-1935)

Piano Sonata Op. 1 (?1907-8)

Jean Sibelius (1865-1957)

5 Esquisses Op. 114 (1929)

*Maisema • Talvikuva • Metsälampi • Metsälaulu •
Kevätnäky*

Josef Suk (1874-1935)

Souvenirs from *About Mother* Op. 28 (1907)

Song from *Lullabies* Op. 33 (1910-2)

Allegro vivo from *Things Lived and Dreamt* Op. 30 (1909)

Christmas Day from *4 Episodes* (1897-1923)

Isaac Albéniz (1860-1909)

Azulejos (1909) *completed by Enrique Granados*
Navarra (1909)

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The common thread linking the composers in this evening's programme is that they all faced the challenge of forging a coherent personal style at a time when the language of music was in a state of constant flux. Covering a period of a little over two decades at the beginning of the 20th Century, the works included exemplify just a few of the many ways in which composers succeeded in speaking in their own voices amid the competing stylistic currents of late Romanticism, Impressionism, Expressionism and Atonalism.

One of the more conservative figures who reached musical maturity in Vienna in the early years of the century was **Kornauth**, who was born in Olomouc – in what is now the Czech region of Moravia – and moved to the Austrian capital at the age of 18, where he studied piano, composition and musicology. He gained his PhD at the University of Vienna in 1915, with a dissertation on thematic development in Haydn's string quartets. It's probably no coincidence that his *Fantasie*, written in the same year, is characterised by some very carefully thought-out thematic development, though the lush late-Romantic musical language is worlds away from Haydn's much sparer idiom. The *Fantasie*'s kaleidoscopic changes of atmosphere suggest rather the influence of Richard Strauss, who cast a long shadow over the music of many Central European composers born in the last few decades of the 19th Century.

By the time he came to write his *Métopes* (composed in the same year as Kornauth's *Fantasie*), the slightly older **Szymanowski** had already undergone his own Straussian phase. In the years immediately before the First World War, he undertook several trips to the Mediterranean region, and as a result of his experiences in Sicily and North Africa immersed himself in the study of ancient Greek and Arabic culture. The inspiration for *Métopes* came from the sculpted stone slabs that originally adorned the ancient Greek temples at Selinunte in Sicily and were later transferred to Palermo, where the composer most likely saw them in 1911. At about this time, Szymanowski – whose travels also took in Paris – was falling increasingly under the spell of French music, in particular that of Debussy and Ravel. The three tableaux that make up *Métopes* – one of Szymanowski's most impressionistic works – depict the various female figures who try to deflect Ulysses from his purpose of returning to his kingdom of Ithaca following his adventures in the Trojan War.

Like Szymanowski, **Blumenfeld** was born in what is today central Ukraine. The two men were in fact related (Blumenfeld's mother and Szymanowski's father were cousins) but culturally gravitated in quite different directions. While Szymanowski received his musical education in Warsaw and travelled extensively in western Europe, Blumenfeld studied with Rimsky-Korsakov at the Saint Petersburg Conservatory and eventually became a professor at the Moscow Conservatory. The main influences on him were Tchaikovsky and Rachmaninov,

as is evident from the rich late-Romantic colouring and highly virtuosic piano writing of the *Sonata-Fantasia*.

At the beginning of the 20th Century, the group of Viennese composers clustered around Schoenberg became increasingly convinced that the over-ripe language of late Romanticism had reached a dead end and that a more rigorous approach to composition was required to help music escape from this impasse. **Berg** became a pupil of Schoenberg in 1904, and after studying the basics of harmony and counterpoint with him, began to devote himself to composition proper. His official Op. 1, the Piano Sonata, underwent a protracted genesis: Berg may have begun work on it as early as 1907, but it was not published until 1910. Though one of his first acknowledged works, the Sonata provides ample proof that Berg had already taken to heart the Schoenbergian ideals of thematic economy and continuous development – the notion that all aspects of a composition should derive from a single idea.

The five *Esquisses* are **Sibelius**'s very last pieces for solo piano. Like *Tapiola* (1926), his last completed orchestral work, these enigmatic mood pictures are characterised by tonal ambiguity and show the composer moving in the direction of an increasingly abstract idiom. According to his biographer Erik Tawaststjerna, 'Sibelius responded with exceptional intensity to the moods of nature and the changes in the seasons' and it is perhaps fitting that his farewell to the piano should exude the bleakness of a Nordic landscape dominated by pine forests – a bleakness that is not alleviated until the final piece, *Kevätnäky* ('Spring Vision'), which concludes the cycle on a slightly more cheerful note.

Suk was the favourite pupil (and later son-in-law) of Dvořák, but despite the close relationship between the two men, the younger composer very quickly established his own creative personality. The four pieces included here reveal the more intimate aspects of this personality: there is a tender recollection of his wife Otylka in *Souvenirs*, a fond reflection on the innocent pleasures of childhood in *Song*, a restlessly questioning number from the cycle *Things Lived and Dreamt*, and finally an affectionate depiction of a traditional Czech Christmas.

The Spaniard **Albéniz** was one of the many composers who towards the end of the 19th Century looked to folk music – in his case, that of Andalusia – for inspiration in the forging of a style that was both highly individual and firmly rooted in tradition. His earlier works inspired by Spanish folk music tend to have a picture-postcard quality, but after he moved to Paris in 1894, Albéniz relied less on such exoticisms and his style became deeper and more inward-looking, as exemplified by *Azulejos*, whose title means 'tiles' or 'mosaics'. But he never quite abandoned the rhythmic exuberance that had always been an essential hallmark of his style, as can be heard from *Navarra*.

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