

WIGMORE HALL 125

Monday 20 October 2025
1.00pm

Alexandre Tharaud piano

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (1756-1791)

Piano Sonata in A K331 (c.1783)

*I. Tema con variazioni. Andante grazioso •
II. Menuetto • III. Alla Turca. Allegretto*

Francis Poulenc (1899-1963)

Improvisation No. 15 in C minor 'Hommage à Édith Piaf' (1959)

Les chemins de l'amour (1940)

Jacques Brel (1929-1978)

Ne me quitte pas (1959) *arranged by Abdel Raman El Bacha*

Gérard Pesson (b.1958)

Noir dormant (d'après Barbara) (2012)

Charles Trenet (1913-2001)

L'âme des poètes (1951) *arranged by Jean Wiéner*

Mes jeunes années (1949) *arranged by Jean Wiéner*

Monsieur, vous oubliez votre cheval (1938) *arranged by Alexis Weissenberg*

Improvisations on *chansons* by Piaf, Barbara, Baker, Brel and others



This concert is being broadcast live on BBC Radio 3 and will be available on BBC Sounds for a further 30 days



Help us raise £125,000
for 125 years of music

To find out more visit wigmore-hall.org.uk/donate



Join & Support
Donations

Wigmore Hall is a no smoking venue. No recording or photographic equipment may be taken into the auditorium nor used in any other part of the Hall without the prior written permission of the management. In accordance with the requirements of City of Westminster persons shall not be permitted to stand or sit in any of the gangways intersecting the seating, or to sit in any other gangways. If standing is permitted in the gangways at the sides and rear of the seating, it shall be limited to the number indicated in the notices exhibited in those positions. Disabled Access and Facilities - full details from 020 7935 2141. Wigmore Hall is equipped with a loop to help hearing aid users receive clear sound without background noise. Patrons can use this facility by switching hearing aids to 'T'.



Please ensure that watch alarms, mobile phones and any other electrical devices which can become audible are switched off. Phones on a vibrate setting can still be heard, please switch off.

The Wigmore Hall Trust Registered Charity No. 1024838
36 Wigmore Street, London W1U 2BP • [Wigmore-hall.org.uk](https://wigmore-hall.org.uk) • John Gilhooly Director

Wigmore Hall Royal Patron HRH The Duke of Kent, KG
Honorary Patrons Aubrey Adams OBE; André and Rosalie Hoffmann; Louise Kaye; Kohn Foundation; Mr and Mrs Paul Morgan

For **Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart**, his third and final journey to Paris in 1778 proved to be a disaster, both personally and professionally. Although he composed several important pieces there, including the 'Paris' Symphony K297, he struggled to obtain the recognition and employment he wanted, and quickly found himself becoming disillusioned with the city and its nobility. Most tragically, Mozart's mother, who had accompanied him to Paris, died suddenly during their stay, and he never returned.

One of Mozart's most celebrated solo piano works, the Sonata in A K331 was long thought to date from his time in Paris, but is now known to have been written later, around 1783; nonetheless, it displays some French influences. Unusually for this period, the sonata opens with a movement in theme and variations form. The melodious theme, which Alfred Einstein calls 'utterly French', is a gentle, rocking *siciliana*, which is then elaborated on through the use of appoggiaturas in the first variation. The second variation is cheeky and playful, and the third transports us into the minor mode. In the fourth variation, new technical challenges are introduced through the use of hand crossing, whilst the expressive heart of the movement comes with the fifth, marked *Adagio*, which is richly decorated through ornamentation. A jovial, *opera buffa*-like spirit characterises the sixth and final variation, which ends with a flourish.

In 2014, the middle portion of the autograph manuscript of this sonata was rediscovered in Budapest (the last page is held in Salzburg, and the other pages are still missing). The autograph contains some subtle but important differences from the first edition (the version more commonly heard today), including a rhythmic alteration in the fifth variation of the first movement, and a different note (A, rather than C sharp) in bar 3 of the following minuet and trio. Typically elegant in character, this second movement again features difficult hand crossing. The finale, a rondo, is undoubtedly one of Mozart's most popular compositions. Its marking, *Alla turca*, refers to the piece's imitation of Turkish military (Janissary) bands, which featured piccolos, cymbals and drums. In Mozart's day, some fortepianos had a dedicated 'janissary' pedal that activated miniature drums and cymbals, adding even greater effect to the movement's distinctive arpeggiated chords.

Francis Poulenc wrote his 15 *Improvisations* over a period of 27 years: the first six date from 1932, whilst the last comes from 1959. Much of Poulenc's piano music consists of miniatures, rather than large-scale forms, and the *Improvisations* are no exception; none of them last longer than three and a half minutes. The final *Improvisation* in C minor is Poulenc's tribute to the great French singer Edith Piaf (1915-63), and has an appropriately dusky quality that evokes the smoky atmosphere of both the cabaret and Piaf's own voice. Despite its brevity, the piece is passionate and soulful, combining elements of classical and French popular song (*chanson*).

Poulenc himself was one of the most prolific 20th-century exponents of the French art song, or *mélodie*,

composing nearly 150 in all. What is perhaps today his most popular song, *Les chemins de l'amour* ('The ways of love'), however, comes from his 1940 incidental music – now otherwise entirely lost – for Jean Anouilh's play *Léocadia*. Premiered and later recorded by Yvonne Printemps, the song is a *valse chantée* (literally, a 'sung waltz'), quintessentially French and romantic in character. Poulenc wrote that composing it lifted his spirits during the misery of the French occupation of Paris, and its nostalgic, romantic character is exemplified by the shift between C sharp minor and D flat major throughout.

Written in 1959, *Ne me quitte pas* ('Don't leave me') is perhaps the most well-known *chanson* by the Belgian singer-songwriter **Jacques Brel**. The song was composed after Brel's mistress Suzanne Gabriello (known as 'Zizou') became pregnant with his child and, after he refused to acknowledge it as his own, cut ties with him (later having an abortion). Brel later stated that, despite its sensual qualities, *Ne me quitte pas* was not a love song, but rather a 'hymn to the cowardice of men'. The song has been covered numerous times, notably by the French singer Johnny Hallyday in 1984; it became an English-language pop standard as 'If You Go Away', translated by Rod McKuen, and was recorded by Greta Keller, Shirley Bassey and Frank Sinatra, amongst others.

Gérard Pesson's *Noir dormant* (d'après Barbara) ('Sleeping black') was written for Alexandre Tharaud in 2012. Its subtitle, 'Berceuse à bas voltage', evokes the composer's interest in lullabies, a theme that regularly recurs in his music and also regularly featured in his radio broadcasts for France musique. The piece is a homage to the song *Une petite cantate* ('A little cantata') by the French singer Barbara (1930-97), itself a tribute to her friend and collaborator, the cabaret pianist Liliane Benelli. Here, the main motif of the song is transformed into a dreamy, almost otherworldly evocation.

One of the most prolific French singer-songwriters of the 20th Century, **Charles Trenet** composed nearly 1,000 songs across his 60-year career. *L'âme de poètes* ('The soul of poets'), from 1951, is in the style of the French *valse musette*, and has a charming nostalgic quality perfectly suited to the text, which tells of how the songs of poets 'still run through the streets' long after they have disappeared. Nostalgia of a different sort is found in *Mes jeunes années* ('My young years'), which was written for the *Compagnons de la Chanson*. It is an intimate, loving tribute to the natural beauty of the Pyrenees, with its mountains, greenery and waterfalls, and the memories of a lost pre-war childhood. *Vous oubliez votre cheval* ('You forget your horse') makes for a toe-tapping jazzy finale, especially in the virtuosic piano transcription by the Bulgarian-French pianist Alexis Weissenberg (1929-2012), first heard on his pseudonymously-titled record *Mr Nobody Plays Trenet*.

© Dr Andrew Frampton 2025

Reproduction and distribution is strictly prohibited.