WIGMORE HALL

Monday 21 July 2025
7.30pm

Robert Levin fortepiano

Felix Mendelssohn (1809-1847)	3 Etudes Op. 104b (1836) *No. 1 in B flat minor – Presto • No. 2 in F – Allegro con moto • No. 3 in A minor – Allegro vivace*
Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827)	Piano Sonata No. 27 in E minor Op. 90 (1814) *I. Mit Lebhaftigkeit und durchaus mit Empfindung und Ausdruck • II. Nicht zu geschwind und sehr singbar vorgetragen*
Robert Schumann (1810-1856)	Waldszenen Op. 82 (1848-9) *I. Eintritt im Walde • II. Jäger auf der Lauer • III. Einsame Blumen • IV. Verrufene Stelle • V. Freundliche Landschaft • VI. Herberge • VII. Vogel als Prophet • VIII. Jagdlied • IX. Abschied*
Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach (1714-1788)	Fantasia in F sharp minor H300 (1788)
	Interval
Franz Schubert (1797-1828)	Piano Sonata in B flat D960 (1828) *I. Molto moderato • II. Andante sostenuto • III. Scherzo. Allegro vivace con delicatezza • IV. Allegro ma non troppo*

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In 1835, **Mendelssohn** moved to Leipzig, where he had been appointed conductor of the Gewandhaus Orchestra. The city became very much his home, especially after he married Cécile Jeanrenaud, daughter of a French clergyman, in 1837. This happy event helped to lift and stabilise his moods after the death of his father, which had affected him deeply.

Composition of the *3 Etudes* spanned this period of change, as they were written between 1834 and 1838 (Mendelssohn was more concerned with completing bigger projects such as his oratorio *St Paul*). Although the first of them is headed 'pianissimo throughout', it paradoxically rises to a fortissimo climax. Another puzzle for the pianist is finding spare fingers to play the melody, which sits between high treble arpeggios and deep bass octaves. The second is one of Mendelssohn's 'fairy' scherzos, and the third a whirring tarantella.

After having written no solo piano music for five years, **Beethoven** composed this work in 1814. The next sonata would not appear until 1816, so Op. 90 is something of a resting point between the widely varied moods and styles of the previous sonatas and the sublime 'late' sonatas. Its outer form – an agitated first movement followed by a calmer second movement – might seem to foreshadow the final sonata, Op. 111, but Op. 90's scale is altogether more modest.

The work is dedicated to Prince Moritz Lichnowsky, a friend of Beethoven's and brother of one of his most important patrons. Moritz was himself generous in providing material support, and Beethoven was keen to stress that the dedication was from the heart and not prompted by these favours. The tempo markings are in German rather than the usual Italian – a phase the composer went through for a few months. The songful simplicity of the second movement would be a significant influence on Schubert.

In the first half of the 19th Century, relatively little of the countryside had been tamed, and nature was the abode of much that was unknown and threatening, both real and imaginary. 'The woods' were the darkest and most unsettling place of all, as many a fairytale attested. And **Robert Schumann** read the works of the Brothers Grimm and Hans Christian Andersen to his children almost every night.

So these 'Woodland Scenes', written in late 1848 and early 1849, are not intended to be merely picturesque. The nine movements include depictions of a convivial tavern scene and a welcoming landscape, but much else that is disquieting. The fourth piece, 'Verrufene Stelle', even describes a flower that sucks human blood – the composer's wife, Clara, who used her fame as a pianist to promote Robert's compositions, omitted this movement from her performances.

The title of the best-known movement is usually rendered in English as 'The prophet bird', but 'Bird as prophet' is a more accurate translation. While the delicate outer sections suggest birdsong and iridescent plumage, the central episode, in which the prophecy is delivered, has a religious tone and is the most consoling music in the cycle.

In a celebrated treaty on the art of playing keyboard instruments, **Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach** asserted that 'Anyone who can improvise may be assured of a secure future as a composer.' For this fifth child of JS Bach, keyboard improvisation was a speciality, whether at home, at private gatherings or in the concert hall. While these improvised fantasias may have flowed straight from the head to the fingers, they were certainly not undisciplined. In his advice to other improvisers, Bach was insistent that there must be an underlying structure.

Therefore Bach's published fantasias may be regarded as close in spirit to his improvisations. The one in F sharp minor, H300, composed in his last year, frequently moves off in new directions but returns throughout to motifs heard at the outset. Beethoven (himself a noted improviser) acknowledged his debt to CPE Bach, both verbally and in his music.

Schubert's final three piano sonatas, written as his health declined in the closing months of his life, surpass in ambition, scale and scope all of his earlier compositions in that genre. The B flat, his last sonata, often speaks softly, receiving and imparting intimations of great seriousness, acknowledging the proximity of fear and anguish, but continuing on a course of fluid lyricism.

It begins in a meditative mood, with a theme reliant on hymn-like harmonic writing. But after a single phrase we hear a low trill like a rumble of far-off thunder, and the music pauses to listen before continuing. These low trills recur as an ominous presence throughout the movement, and the coda offers no grand, affirmative conclusion.

The slow movement is one of the most sacred spaces in the piano repertoire. At the end of the first, long paragraph, simplicity and sublimity meld into one; the change of a single harmony note in a repeated phrase can open up a new realm of emotion and understanding. The contrasting middle section sets up a more flowing momentum that survives in the reprise of the opening music as a rocking figure in the bass.

The *Scherzo* seems both playful and vulnerable in its childlike innocence. The *Trio* is more sombre, more searching, with a hint of regret.

The finale opens with a call to attention. The rondo's first episode bubbles along blithely but is suddenly halted in its tracks, whereupon an unexpectedly tempestuous passage bursts forth. Although the rondo theme returns, it is unable to re-establish its original insouciance; the more violent music keeps breaking through. Eventually the two extremes of this movement combine in a *Presto* coda – the dance theme of the rondo delivered with the force of the intervening tempest.