WIGMORE HALL

Saturday 21 June 2025
7.30pm

Nelson Goerner piano

Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827) — Piano Sonata No. 28 in A Op. 101 (1816)
I. Etwas lebhaft und mit der innigsten Empfindung • II. Lebhaft. Marschmässig • III. Langsam und sehnsuchtsvoll • IV. Geschwind, doch nicht zu sehr, und mit Entschlossenheit

Robert Schumann (1810-1856) — Carnaval Op. 9 (1835)
Préambule • Pierrot • Arlequin • Valse noble • Eusebius • Florestan • Coquette • Réplique • Papillons • Lettres dansantes • Chiarina • Chopin • Estrella • Reconnaissance • Pantalon et Colombine • Valse allemande • Paganini • Aveu • Promenade • Pause • Marche des Davidsbündler contre les Philistins

Interval

Sergey Rachmaninov (1873-1943) — 10 Preludes Op. 23 (1901-3)
No. 1 in F sharp minor • No. 2 in B flat • No. 3 in D minor • No. 4 in D • No. 5 in G minor • No. 6 in E flat • No. 7 in C minor • No. 8 in A flat • No. 9 in E flat minor • No. 10 in G flat

Andrey Schulz-Evler (1852-1905) — Concert Arabesque on themes from the waltz 'An die schönen Blauen Donau' (?1904)

UNDER 35S

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Piano-making had undergone radical advances prior to the period (between 1815 and 1817) in which **Beethoven** worked upon his piano sonata Op. 101; so too had nationalism, as world leaders gathered to remake Europe at the Congress of Vienna. These were changing times, and Beethoven – confident of his own stature and purpose – was changing too. He provided tempo indications for Op. 101 in both Italian and German.

Meanwhile, his hearing continued to decay, and he was increasingly impervious to fashion. He joked to his publisher Haslinger that the sonata should be entitled 'Sonata of Difficult Execution in A major', 'because whatever is difficult is also beautiful, good, great and so forth'. (A Viennese critic had recently described his Seventh Symphony as 'of Difficult Execution'). The point is that Beethoven was exploring; moving with assurance into realms where he was happy to be understood primarily by those who shared his vision.

So the flowing first movement – both rich and intimate – serves less as a grand entry to the sonata than as a prelude to the second movement: a playful-assertive paraphrase on a *marche militaire* that takes the place of the usual scherzo. The brief, yearning slow movement, too, behaves like a prelude to the finale – which embraces and enlarges upon the sonata's many moods before launching into a muscular, Bach-like *fugato* and a conclusion that seems (until the final blazing resolution) almost to subvert itself. Beethoven dedicated the sonata to his aristocratic piano pupil Dorothea von Ertmann, 'as a token of my admiration for both your talent and your person'.

Carnival was – and is – a liberating force in European culture: a celebration of misrule, where adopting a new identity is as simple as putting on a mask and a costume. *Fasching: Schwanke auf vier Noten* ('Carnival: Pranks with four notes') was the name that **Schumann** initially gave to the cycle of piano pieces that he composed in the winter of 1834-5, before settling on a word that summed up the whole conception – *Carnaval*.

So these 21 interlinked miniatures represent a carnival of the imagination (and, of course, the heart). Schumann's imagination was richly populated, and many of its leading players have come to the dance. Artistic heroes (*Paganini* and *Chopin*) mingle with figures from *commedia dell'arte* (*Pierrot*, *Arlequin*, *Panatalon et Colombine*). Schumann's sweetheart *Estrella* is here – his imaginative name for Ernestine von Fricken, to whom he had recently become engaged. But so too – intriguingly – is *Chiarina* – the 15-year-old Clara Wieck.

And naturally, so are *Florestan* and *Eusebius*, the passionate radical and the poetic dreamer whom Schumann identified as two parts of his own personality. They were the joint leaders of Schumann's *Davidsbünd* – the 'League of David', sworn to oppose Philistinism. When, in the final scene, the *Davidsbündler* march to war, they do so – impossibly – in the tempo of a waltz. The shade of Beethoven's 'Emperor' concerto watches over them from on high.

There's a lot to unmask here; even more when you consider that Schumann's basic 'four notes' are A, E flat, C and B, which in German musical terminology spells Asch – the town in Bohemia where Robert had courted Ernestine. But the Romantic, after all, thrives on mystery. Five years later he dismissed the secret of *Carnaval* as 'mere letters of the scale that happened to be part of my own name'. Take that – and the music – as you choose.

Rachmaninov's education was what we'd now call 'old school'. As a teenager in Moscow, he lodged in the house of his Conservatoire piano teacher Nikolai Zverev. His fellow-student Matvei Pressman recalled Zverev's régime:

> The practice had to begin at 6am [...] And woe to him who betrayed any sleepiness in his playing. Zverev would storm in, a terrifying figure in his nightwear, with an angry shout and sometimes a hard smack.

Understandably, Rachmaninov rebelled. From 1889 he took classes with Stepan Smolensky, director of Moscow's Synodal School. Kindly and progressive, Smolensky believed that the ancient *znamenny* chants contained both the seeds of musical renewal and the essence of something profoundly Russian.

Both aspects of Rachmaninov's training permeate his Preludes Op. 23 (1901-3). The first prelude moves from quiet restlessness to troubled dissonance; the second pours forth, torrent-like, in affirmation. There's a droll Minuet (No. 3), and a glowing, Chopin-like nocturne (No. 4), while the bravura *marche militaire* of No. 5 has rightly become a favourite. The radiant No. 6, said Rachmaninov, 'came to me all at once on the day my daughter was born' (14 May 1903) while the restless whirling of No. 7 evokes the sort of nature-imagery in which Chopin excelled – the first of three kindred preludes (Nos. 7-9) revolving around elements of bravura technique, though always saturated with poetry. And the last, No. 10, combines the pensiveness of the first with a new-found and luminous serenity. The poet Maxim Gorky and the elderly painter Ilya Repin listened to the Op. 23 Preludes together soon after their completion. 'How well he hears the silence', commented Gorky.

Adolf Schulz-Evler was born in Radom, in the Austrian-ruled section of Poland, possibly with the surname Szulc. He studied in Warsaw and Berlin (under the piano virtuoso Carl Tausig), and his career took him to Moscow, Kharkiv and back to Warsaw, where a critic in 1896 described him as a pianist of 'exceptional technique, who combines subtlety and delicacy of sound with bravura and power'. All of which is borne out by the best-known of his 40-plus surviving piano works – his *Concert Arabesque on themes from the waltz 'An die schönen Blauen Donau'*, first published in Vienna some time after 1904, though almost certainly composed (for Schulz-Evler's own recitals) long before that. Schulz-Evler evokes the spirit of Liszt in this dazzling keyboard reworking: less transcription than transfiguration, lifted forever into the pantheon of piano showpieces by Josef Lhévinne's breathtaking 1928 recording.