WIGMORE HALL

Friday 21 March 2025
1.00pm

Maxim Bernard piano

Felix Mendelssohn (1809-1847)	Song without Words in A flat Op. 38 No. 6 (1836)
	Song without Words in A Op. 62 No. 6 (1842)
	Song without Words in C Op. 67 No. 4 (pub. 1845)
Fryderyk Chopin (1810-1849)	Polonaise-fantaisie in A flat Op. 61 (1845-6)
Franz Liszt (1811-1886)	Impromptu in G D899 No. 3 von Schubert S565b/2 (1868)
	Feux follets from *Etudes d'exécution transcendante* S139 (pub. 1852)
Robert Schumann (1810-1856)	Carnaval Op. 9 (1834-5) *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*

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The four composers in this recital were all born between 1809 and 1811, and are central to the romantic movement. Two of them, Felix Mendelsohn and Frederic Chopin died in their 30s; Robert Schumann in his mid-40s. Franz Liszt (1811-86), who outlived Wagner, saw out the greater part of the 19th Century. All four were virtuoso pianists and their music fuelled the unstoppable advance of the piano in the concert hall and in domestic life, tailored to both professional and amateur musicians.

Berlioz remarked of Saint-Saëns that 'he knows everything but lacks inexperience', and the same comment could apply to **Mendelssohn** (1809-47). Proclaimed both by Goethe and Schumann as the second Mozart, he was a freakishly precocious and complete musician. Aged only 16, he composed the astounding masterpiece that is the Octet for strings. He was feted all over Europe, was a great favourite of Queen Victoria and Prince Albert, and he initiated the revival of Bach's music. His music deferred to the classical style of the previous century, but the romantic impressionism of works such as the *Hebrides Overture* or the *Scottish Symphony* still has an irresistible freshness. He composed a great deal of piano music, including, from 1830, eight volumes of *Lieder ohne Worte* ('Songs without Words'), each of six miniatures, with a broad technical range. The genre possibly was the result of a game the young Mendelssohn played with his similarly gifted sister Fanny, in which they would compose piano pieces, and then add the words. In Victorian times, many of the pieces acquired titles, some of them of excruciating sentimentality.

The best known of the Op. 38 'Songs without Words' is No. 6 (pub. 1837), bearing the composer's title 'Duetto', with two strands, soprano and tenor, supported by elegant arpeggios, evoking the composer and his fiancée. The well-known sixth 'Song without Words' from the fifth set, Op. 62 (pub. 1844), titled *Frühlingslied* ('Spring song') by the composer but not published as such, presents the melody over a firm bass line, decorated with spread chords. The Op. 67 set (1845), the sixth, was the last to be published in Mendelssohn's lifetime (two more sets appeared posthumously). No. 4 has acquired the title *Spinnerlied* ('Spinning song'), in this case apt given the music's whirring precision and meticulous craft.

Chopin wrote the great *Polonaise-Fantaisie*, Op. 61 in 1846, when he was becoming increasingly ill with tuberculosis, and when his relationship with George Sand was unravelling. It was his last extended composition, and it gave him some trouble. Despite its organic feel, he added the famous rhapsodic and improvisational opening at a late stage. With Op. 61, the six mature Polonaises embrace patriotism fierce and tender, heroism, ceremonial dance and military swagger. After Op. 61's bard-like opening, Chopin keeps his main theme under subliminal wraps, its identity continuously changing. A rhythmic fanfare of E flat octaves snaps things into unequivocal Polonaise focus, but there is still a strong element of restless development before the music switches into a meditative, slow central section in B major. The *Polonaise-Fantaisie* shows Chopin at his most exploratory in terms of structure and harmonic range, and one can only speculate where this might have led him had he lived longer.

Besides his output as a composer, **Liszt** was also a tireless editor of other people's music, ranging from new fingerings to full-blown arrangements. Schubert was a particular favourite, from the *Wanderer Fantasy* recast as a piano concerto to editions of both sets of Impromptus, with the Impromptu in G flat, D899 No. 3 oddly altered. Not only did he transpose it up a semi-tone to G major, he also changed Schubert's time-signature from eight crotchets to a bar to four; and then in the return of the opening material, he raises the main melody up an octave supported by spread chords, adding a sheen of seraphic and very Lisztian magic.

It took Liszt 25 years to realise the ideal of his *Transcendental Studies* S139, in which virtuosity and imagination flatter each other. The set of 12 (1851) convey a highly romanticised impressionism, and apart from the opening brief Prelude they are substantial pieces. The fifth, *Feux follets* ('Will-o-the-wisps') is a flickering cascade of luminous, flickering spirits, scored with extraordinary delicacy, precision – and stupendous difficulty.

Schumann wrote *Carnaval* while in his 20s, still intent on a career as a concert pianist, and briefly engaged to Ernestine von Fricken before he embarked on his tortuous courtship of Clara Wieck, the teenaged daughter of his piano teacher Friedrich Wieck. It was also the period when he launched the journal *Die neue Zeitschrift für Musik* in which he introduced people he knew disguised as 'Davidsbündler', whose 'March against the Philistines' brings *Carnaval* to a rousing conclusion. The whole work is seeded with a musical cipher based on the name of the town, Asch, where Ernestine was born.

The sequence of 20 miniatures give the dancers at a masked ball their moment in the limelight. Schumann himself is represented both by extrovert 'Florestan' and diffident, dreamy 'Eusebius'; Clara ('Chiarina') with a sudden passionate outburst; Ernestine ('Estrella') in a piece marked *con affetto*; the composers Chopin and Paganini (Schumann famously had hailed Chopin as a genius in his journal, although Chopin did not return the compliment), along with waltzes and other 'colour' pieces to add to the sense of riotous occasion. Soon after the mock-pompous 'Préambule' comes a rising tune in the 'Valse noble', which recalls the first number of Schumann's *Papillons*, completed in 1830, and which also features in 'Florestan'. There is another reference to *Papillons*, in its Finale, which introduces the same *Thème de XVIIème siècle*, the rather stately 'Grandfather's Dance' that used to mark the end of the ball and which serves the same function in *Carnaval*, here with Philistine-bashing intent. Schumann's febrile imagination, nourished at the time by the bizarre novels of Jean Paul, is matched by some virtuosic demands – for example, the inner repeated notes of 'Reconnaissance' – and resistance to the parade's spell is futile.