

WIGMORE HALL

Wednesday 21 May 2025
7.30pm

Leif Ove Andsnes piano
Bertrand Chamayou piano

Franz Schubert (1797-1828) Rondo in A D951 (1828)

György Kurtág (b.1926) From *Játékok* (pub. 1979-97)
Hommage à Farkas Ferenc (3) (Evocation of Petrushka) •
Les Adieux (in Janáček's Manier) • *Sirens of the Deluge -*
Waiting for Noah • *An Apocryphal Hymn (In the Style of Alfred*
Schnittke) • *Hommage à Farkas Ferenc (2)* • *Dühös korál*
(Furious Chorale) • *Hommage à Stravinsky - Harangok (Bells)* •
Hommage à Halmágyi Mihály

Franz Schubert Allegro in A minor D947 'Lebensstürme' (1828)

Interval

Franz Schubert Fugue in E minor D952 (1828)

György Kurtág From *Játékok*
A Voice in the Distance (For Alfred Schlee's 80th birthday) •
The little squall • *Hommage à Schubert* • *Hommage tardif à*
Karskaya • *Chorale (for Benjamin Rajeczky's 80th Birthday)* •
Study to Pilinszky's 'Hölderlin' (position exercise) • *Kyrie* •
Hommage à Soproni (in memoriam matris carissimae)

Franz Schubert Fantasie in F minor D940 (1828)



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György Kurtág and his fellow Hungarian György Ligeti first met soon after the end of the Second World War in 1945, in bomb-damaged Budapest, but whereas Ligeti left Hungary after the Soviet invasion of 1956, Kurtág lived through most of the country's 40-year Communist (1949–89) regime. In the course of a life spanning nearly a century (100th-anniversary celebrations are planned for next year) he has also witnessed seismic shifts in musical history, being born only a few years after the death of Saint-Saëns and living at the same time as Jean Sibelius, Sergey Rachmaninov, Richard Strauss, Aaron Copland, Steve Reich and John Adams. Among his piano students were Zoltán Kocsis and Wigmore Hall favourite Sir András Schiff. It is for his own instrument that he conceived *Játékok* ('Games') – a 10-volume series of piano pieces written between 1973 and 2011. Initially appearing as a piano method, *Játékok* was inspired by the spontaneous curiosity and wonder of children at the keyboard – 'children for whom the piano still means a toy,' Kurtág said – but from Book 5, it acquired the subtitle 'Diary entries, personal messages', suggesting a more personal motivation. Aphoristic, provocative and often fragmentary, the pieces embody Kurtág's fondness for concision and distillation. 'That's why I like Kafka and why I like Beckett,' he recently said, 'that it's so precise and uses as few words as necessary.' As could be gleaned in Kurtág's performances from *Játékok* with his wife Márta – and as we are no doubt to hear tonight – it is less about playing the piano than play at the piano.

Honouring a teacher of Kurtág's at the Music Academy of Budapest, 'Hommage à Farkas Ferenc' is one of the many tributes, memorials, gifts and greetings sprinkled among the volumes. Subtitled 'Evocation of Petrushka', it captures the dual qualities – the crude and the supernatural – of the central puppet character from Stravinsky's second ballet for the Ballets Russes. 'Les Adieux' also inhabits an unreal realm – elliptical harmonies combine with cavernous resonance – and there is a nod to the Hungarian cimbalom, whose strings are struck by light hammers. 'Sirens of the Deluge' is a short inundation that conveys the urgency as well as the vertical movement of a downpour. By contrast, 'An Apocryphal Hymn', nominally in the style of the Russian polystylist Alfred Schnittke, is a chorale of dense but deceptively transparent chords. The second of tonight's homages to Ferenc Farkas (there are four in Book 3) references a 'colinda melody' – a Christmas song from Romania and Moldova – here, as the subtitle reveals, 'faintly recollected'.

The final three items in tonight's first *Játékok* sequence come from Book 4, which was the first to include pieces for four hands (followed by Book 8). In 'Furious Chorale' the two players splutter irredeemably at cross-purposes but with the beauty of a malfunctioning machine. In conveying the bells of 'Hommage à Stravinsky' the two pianists, though still divergent, somehow achieve some sense of co-ordination, if not consonance. The *plein air* 'Hommage

à Halmágyi Mihály' honours the folk violinist who Kurtág heard in Transylvania in 1973.

In their performances together, which continued into their eighties, György and Márta Kurtág would intersperse their *Játékok* selections with transcriptions of JS Bach. Tonight the Classical-period pillars come from **Franz Schubert**, the discovery of whose 'Unfinished' Symphony by the pre-teenaged Kurtág was the springboard to a life in music. All four were composed in the last year of Schubert's tragically short life. The warmly lyrical opening theme of the Rondo in A, with its gently lapping accompaniment, could be by no-one else. The Allegro in A minor opens with dramatic turbulence, though its second theme returns to the good manners of the drawing room. Written for the famous organ of the Heiligenkreuz Abbey near Baden, the Fugue is no dry exercise, balancing formal rigour with harmonic tension. A fugue stands at the imposing culmination of the famous Fantasie in F minor, which fuses four movements into a continuous whole. One of the great Romantic works for piano – irrespective of the number of hands required – it remains a peak at which like-minded pianists (and they better be) gather to commune as a single entity, yielding one to the other to blend touch, phrasing and texture. The Fantasie may in places parade itself as a salon piece, but it is also without question a musical giant.

Tonight's second *Játékok* sequence begins with a birthday gift to Alfred Schlee, director of Kurtág's Viennese publisher, Universal Edition. Intimately pointillist and frozen in time, here the left hand crosses back and forth over the right hand's fragile stepwise motion, offering a laconic commentary. 'The Little Squall', written for Kurtág's brilliant former pupil Zoltán Kocsis (1952–2016), could almost be a portrait – a micro whirlwind. Described as a 'consolation' – and containing no indication as to tempo or dynamic – 'Hommage à Schubert' might in its contemplative mood and cluster harmonies seem more closely aligned with Messiaen (who received his own contemplation in Book 6 of *Játékok*).

The second of three tiny 'in memoriams' that conclude Book 5, the impulsive 'late' homage to Russian painter Ida Karskaya, whom Kurtág met in Paris in 1957 (while studying with Messiaen), was written in 1990 within two weeks of her death and so not as tardy as its name suggests. Following the solemn birthday chorale for the 80th birthday of Benjamin Rajeczky (a Hungarian ethnomusicologist) and the differently dark study after 'Hölderlin' (a concentrated three-line poem written for Kurtág by Janós Pilinszky), bells ring in 'Kyrie', briefly unsettled before the chiming is restored. Bells also appear in 'Hommage à Soproni' (to the composer József Soproni, who died in 2021 aged 90), their broader resonances shrouded in delicate ornamentation.

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