

WIGMORE HALL

Thursday 22 June 2023
7.30pm

Lucas Debargue piano

Domenico Scarlatti (1685-1757)

Sonata in A Kk208

Sonata in A Kk24

Sonata in D Kk491

Sonata in D minor Kk141

Fryderyk Chopin (1810-1849)

Ballade No. 2 in F Op. 38 (1836-9)

Prelude in C sharp minor Op. 45 (1841)

Polonaise-fantaisie in A flat Op. 61 (1845-6)

Interval

Charles-Valentin Alkan (1813-1888)

Allegro assai from *Concerto pour piano seul*
Op. 39 No. 8 (pub. 1857)

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A contemporary of Bach and Handel, **Domenico Scarlatti** carved out such a singular creative space that it is hard to slot him into conventional narratives of music history. He did this almost entirely on the basis of a collection of more than 550 keyboard sonatas, designed for performance on a one-manual harpsichord. Most were copied by the composer himself in the 1750s for the use of his patron and pupil Maria Barbara of Braganza, the Queen of Spain, though the chronology of their composition remains open to conjecture. It is little short of astonishing that Scarlatti succeeded in pouring such a diversity of colours, textures and expressive effects into a formal mould that remained more-or-less the same across the entire collection: a simple binary design of two repeated sections, each with two themes. Consider the contrast between the two A major sonatas performed here, with the Italianate lyricism of Kk208 a world apart from the exuberant virtuosity of Kk24. The one common factor apart from formal design is that both sonatas defy orthodoxy. Thus, the melodic continuities and measured rhythms of Kk208 mask a striking and idiosyncratic harmonic syntax; compare the slow movement of Bach's *Italian Concerto*. And no less distinctive is the gallery of unusual effects in Kk24, embracing not just rapid repeated notes and hand crossings, but elements of local colour such as the strumming of a guitar; compare some of Couperin's more colourful *ordres*. There is a similar contrast between Kk491 in D major, whose seguidilla rhythm is a further tribute to Spain (Scarlatti spent the last 30 years of his life there), and the sparkling, mandolin-like repeated notes of Kk141 in D minor.

Like Scarlatti, whom he greatly admired, **Chopin** devoted the bulk of his output to a single instrument, allowing its potentialities and limitations to mould a highly distinctive pianistic counterpoint in which voices can emerge and recede at will. Like Scarlatti, moreover, he drew freely on the popular music of the day, welding it to a classical heritage. Thus, the opening of the Second *Ballade* Op. 38 is really a siciliano in the pastoral key of F major, and it alternates with, confronts, and is eventually synthesized with, etude-like passages in A minor (labelled 'impassioned episodes' by Robert Schumann). This juxtaposition of popular melody and bravura figuration was in keeping with the conventions of postclassical pianism of the 1820s, but in Chopin's hands it was fused with the sonata principle, a creative demonstration that the popular and the significant need not be incompatible. The *Ballade* was completed in Majorca in the winter of 1838-9, prior to Chopin's first summer in Nohant, George Sand's manor house in Berry. And it was in Nohant, during his second summer there in 1841, that he wrote the *Prelude* Op. 45, originally destined for an album to be published by Maurice Schlesinger ('I have composed a Prelude in C sharp minor for Schlesinger; short, as he requested'). Improvisatory in character, and with a single motive 'wandering' enharmonically

throughout, this evocative piece remains somewhat apart in Chopin's output. It is quite different in character from the *24 Preludes* Op. 28.

In a small group of works composed in his final years, Chopin reached a new plateau of creative achievement. It was hard-won, as the manuscript sources indicate, and nowhere more so than in the *Polonaise-fantaisie* Op. 61, which occupied him intermittently for some 18 months during 1845-6. The composer's correspondence makes it clear that for some time he was undecided about a title, and since the sketches reveal that the polonaise rhythm accompanying the main theme was an afterthought, the piece was almost certainly conceived as a fantasy first and foremost, similar to the great F minor *Fantasy* Op. 49. The *Polonaise-fantaisie* offers us perhaps the single most inspired example of Chopin's capacity to maintain vitality and interest over the span of a greatly extended ternary design, 'stretched' by the interpolation of nocturne-like episodes and interrupted by the unexpected return of the introduction after the central slow section. The reprise, in which both the polonaise theme and the central theme return, is in the mode of a romantic apotheosis rather than a classical synthesis.

Chopin spent much of the 1840s in an apartment on the Square d'Orléans, Paris, where one of his neighbours was **Charles-Valentin Alkan**. It is a measure of his respect for Alkan that Chopin performed at one of his benefit concerts, and that he gave instructions for his incomplete *Méthode* to be left to this brilliant, if eccentric, pianist and composer. Rather like Scarlatti, Alkan favoured extravagant virtuosity and a deliberate rejection of convention, and both characteristics are in evidence in the *Allegro assai* from his *Concerto pour piano seul*, published in 1857 as Nos. 8-10 of the *12 Etudes* Op. 39. The practice of performing and even publishing concertos as solos was not unknown in the 19th Century; witness Chopin's *Allegro de concert* Op. 46. But Alkan supplied the *locus classicus*. There is a clear differentiation in texture between the 'tutti' and the 'quasi-solo' sections in this, the first movement of the concerto, but even in 'tutti' sections the technical demands are *in extremis*. Given the massive scale of the movement, it can be difficult to keep our formal bearings, but listen out for the triumphant, if truncated, *ritornello* that follows the extended solo exposition. It is followed by a lyrical G major solo episode, detached from its surroundings, before the colossal development section gets underway. This culminates in a high-octane passage of phenomenal power and intensity, and that in turn ushers in a modified reprise and coda. Relentless, fierce and utterly uncompromising, Alkan's concerto resists easy classification. Quite simply, there is nothing else like it.

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