WIGMORE HALL

Saturday 22 June 2024
7.30pm

Dmitry Shishkin piano

Johann Sebastian Bach (1685-1750)	Chaconne from *Partita No. 2 in D minor* for solo violin BWV1004 (1720) *arranged by Ferruccio Busoni*
Domenico Scarlatti (1685-1757)	Sonata in D minor Kk1 (pub. 1738) Sonata in F minor Kk466 Sonata in E Kk380 'Cortège' Sonata in F sharp Kk319 Sonata in G Kk13 (pub. 1738)
Jean-Philippe Rameau (1683-1764)	Les trois mains (c.1729-30) Le rappel des oiseaux (pub. 1724)
	Interval
Aleksandr Skryabin (1872-1915)	Piano Sonata No. 2 in G sharp minor Op. 19 'Sonata Fantasy' (1892-7) *I. Andante • II. Presto*
Sergey Rachmaninov (1873-1943)	Piano Sonata No. 2 in B flat minor Op. 36 (1913, rev. 1931) *I. Allegro agitato • II. Non allegro - Lento • III. Allegro molto*

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Bach's Second Partita for solo violin seems at first the most modest of the whole set of sonatas and partitas for unaccompanied violin – the *Gigue* comes to its conclusion after about a quarter of an hour. Bach's first audiences, doubtless unprovided with printed programmes, had no way of knowing they were only half-way through, and their wonder must have grown and grown as the magnificent *Chaconne* unwound itself majestically. The medical missionary and Bach scholar Albert Schweitzer thought that 'out of a single theme Bach conjures a whole world'. World enough, and time, for composers and audiences ever since to take the mighty ending on its own, and on its own terms.

Both Mendelssohn and Schumann wrote piano accompaniments to Bach's violin part, which must have eased the path for many an over-tasked fiddler. Brahms arranged the actual violin part to be played on the piano, thoughtfully limiting himself to the left hand alone, in order to match the 'limitations' of an unaccompanied violin. He told Clara Schumann that it was 'one of the most wonderful and incomprehensible pieces of music'. The pianist Ernst Pauer and the composer Joachim Raff both arranged the *Chaconne* at about the same time as Brahms, but for two-handed piano. It's particularly interesting, in these arrangements and the many, many others, to see how the possibility of filling in the chords comes to grief where Bach has cleverly used his very limitations to imply a harmony that cannot be pinned down to actual notes. My favourite spot for this is the falling, sighing figures just after the first set of upward-rushing scales. But such amplifications are at least partly justified by Agricola, Bach's student from 1738 till 1741, who reports that Bach 'often played [the solo violin pieces] on the clavichord, adding as much in the nature of harmony as he found necessary'. I suspect, though, that Bach left the ambiguous bits ambiguous, even at the keyboard! By general consent, Busoni's piano version of the 1890s is the classic, though it's sometimes played as amplified by Alexander Siloti, which makes it even harder.

It's increasingly accepted that Domenico Scarlatti wrote not so much for the harpsichord as for the very first type of pianoforte, as invented by Bartolomeo Cristofori and developed by his pupil, Giovanni Ferrini. These, like the harpsichord, lacked a sustaining pedal, but brought the new opportunity (as implied by the name of the instrument) of playing each note at a different degree of loudness. Vladimir Horowitz's fondness for the composer, occasionally controversial in the past, is triumphantly justified! In this light, such crowded passages as occur in the first sonata about 12 seconds in, where the two hands fight a little over sharing notes, are not so much a demonstration that two manuals are required (as in a harpsichord), but that Cristofori's repetition-action was exemplary. Which indeed it was: he invented a version of the double-escapement, which the world then forgot about until Sébastian Érard re-invented it in the 1820s. For Scarlatti, a sonata was a single movement, divided into two sections, each repeated. Sometimes he wrote them in pairs, but they work well enough singly.

Rameau's *Le rappel des oiseaux* comes from his second book of harpsichord pieces (1724), and *Les trois mains* from the third book (c.1729). The latter certainly looks as if it needs two manuals; it owes its name to some fancy hand-crossing.

The second half of tonight's programme presents two of the pinnacles of Russian sonata-writing. Rachmaninov and Skryabin were classmates in Moscow. In thinking about them, Rutland Boughton's distinction between Musicians and Artists is useful. Boughton was speaking of Brahms and Wagner, but it clarifies a lot about the two Russians as well. Skryabin's life, like Wagner's, was dedicated to the realization of some mighty opus, a *Gesamtkunstwerk*. Wagner managed it; Skryabin only got as far as purchasing the land for his equivalent of Bayreuth, a plot in Darjeeling (India being the home of mysticism in Skryabin's mind) for the production of his *Mysterium*. It came to nothing after Skryabin's death from sepsis in 1915. His 'Sonata Fantasy' dates from 1892-7. Skryabin had not yet pushed his harmony as far as his Chord of Fourths, but the work already demonstrates his penchant for Slow-Fast and galloping jig rhythms.

Skryabin had some excuse (if one were needed) for being an Artist rather than a Musician – he injured his hand by over-practising, rather like Schumann. Had either of these artists maintained a career as a virtuoso, would there have been such music? (The same speculation could be made about a hearing Beethoven.) Though Rachmaninov, supremely practical, seemed to find no difficulty in combining the two. He came from a rich, aristocratic family with no fewer than five estates, but his father, whom the composer described as a wastrel and a gambler, reduced them to a small apartment by the time the boy was ten. Rachmaninov's first years at the Moscow Conservatoire were uncontroversial – everyone agreed that he was lazy. That all changed when he moved in with Skryabin's piano teacher, Nikolai Zverev.

The first version of the Second Sonata was composed in 1913, three years after his triumphant tour of America with his Third Piano Concerto (which he performed in New York with Mahler conducting) – a tour so successful he was able to fulfil his ambition of buying a motor-car. In 1931 he revised the Sonata, cutting out some 20% of it. In 1940, he assented to Vladimir Horowitz's request to put some of it back. (Horowitz had become Rachmaninoff's preferred successor as a performer of the Third Concerto.) Whichever version we hear, the piece exerts its magic.