WIGMORE HALL

Sunday 22 September 2024
7.30pm

This concert is supported by Sam and Alexandra Morgan

Pavel Kolesnikov piano

Fryderyk Chopin (1810-1849)

Prelude in C sharp minor Op. 45 (1841)

Waltz in A minor Op. 34 No. 2 (c.1834)

Waltz in E B44 (c.1829)

Waltz in C sharp minor Op. 64 No. 2 (1847)

Waltz in A flat Op. 42 (1840)

Nocturne in G minor Op. 37 No. 1 (1838)

Nocturne in F Op. 15 No. 1 (1830-2)

Nocturne in C minor Op. 48 No. 1 (1841)

Mazurka in C sharp minor Op. 50 No. 3 (1842)

Mazurka in A flat Op. 50 No. 2 (1842)

Mazurka in G sharp minor Op. 33 No. 1 (1838)

Mazurka in C Op. 56 No. 2 (1843-4)

Mazurka in A minor Op. 17 No. 4 (1833)

Interval

Franz Schubert (1797-1828)

Piano Sonata in B flat D960 (1828)
I. Molto moderato • II. Andante sostenuto • III. Scherzo. Allegro vivace con delicatezza – Trio • IV. Allegro ma non troppo

In this beautifully conceived programme, a sequence of contrasted miniatures dissolves into a single work notable for its 'heavenly length'. Fittingly, the miniatures begin with **Chopin's** *Prelude* Op. 45, which stands apart from the better-known Op. 28 *Preludes*, and is really a stylization of the modulating improvised preludes that were commonly heard in 19th-century concerts. Composed in 1841, it was commissioned by Maurice Schlesinger for inclusion in the album *Keepsake des pianistes*. What follows the *Prelude* is a celebration of three trademark Chopin genres. Of the four waltzes, the earliest is the E major, composed in Warsaw in 1829. It was not published during the composer's lifetime, and is somewhat simpler in design and texture than the later published waltzes. Of these, Op. 34 No. 2 exudes an expressive lyricism that leans towards some of the slower *kujawiak* mazurkas (compare Op. 17 No. 4 in this programme), by no means the only case of cross-fertilization between waltz and mazurka in Chopin. The other two waltzes showcase the composer at his most urbane, though their moods are very different. The lively cross-rhythms and moto perpetuo arcs of figuration in Op. 42 stand in marked contrast to the darker, more melancholy hues of Op. 64 No. 2.

Having established the archetype of a piano nocturne in his early Op. 9 set, Chopin often felt free to diverge from this in later opuses, abandoning the pedigreed ornamental melody with widespread accompaniment, and allowing the genre title to play host to a range of 'guest' genres drawn either from popular pianism or from opera. Thus, Op. 15 No. 1, composed in the early 1830s, alternates a pastorale and an impassioned etude (compare the second *Ballade*). Likewise, in Op. 37 No. 1 (1838-9) hints of a funeral march in the opening section yield to a central chorale. The nocturne archetype does return in the first of the Op. 48 *Nocturnes* (1841), but in the reprise of this piece the melody is enlarged and 'orchestrated' to such powerful effect that it all but breaks the mould of the genre.

The mazurka occupied Chopin throughout his creative life. He carved out for this genre a very special niche, notable for its singular technical devices and for an expressive content that linked the composer's emotional world to the spirit of the nation. Those performed here all belong to the decade between 1833 and 1844. The earliest is Op. 17 No. 4, a piece whose harmonic ambiguities have attracted much comment in the past, and the latest is Op. 56 No. 2, a fast-tempo *oberek*, complete with drone accompaniment and folk-like Lydian fourths. But by far the most ambitious are Nos. 2 and 3 of the Op. 50 set, and especially No. 3, a kind of dance poem whose principal theme is a strict imitative point that seems far removed from folkdance origins. Chopin composed Op. 50 at George Sand's home in Berry, and it was Sand who referred to them as 'wonderful mazurkas … worth more than forty novels'.

The extraordinary outpouring of major works in the final months of **Schubert's** life included his last three piano sonatas, with the B flat major completed in September 1828, just two months before his death. While he responded in his own way to Beethovenian models, Schubert also proposed very different ways of conceiving extended cyclic works, avoiding dynamic goal-directed narratives in favour of more leisurely scenic routes, where essentially similar melodic materials ('breathing the same life', as Schumann put it) drift freely through wide-ranging tonal regions in a spacious, anti-heroic teleology. Where Beethoven tended towards an ever more tightly integrated motivic process, Schubert sought to demonstrate that sustained song-like melody – consider the opening theme of this B flat sonata – might be no less amenable to sonata-symphonic treatment.

In part this was a matter of scale. Schubert's composition drafts establish that the expansiveness of the late sonatas, an obstacle to their assimilation for many years, was in some degree a product of the later stages of their composition. In finalising these works, in other words, the composer stretched their forms like so much elastic. But it was also about tonal planning. In this sonata a traditional tonic-dominant polarity is not so much eschewed (the third theme of a three-stage exposition is in the conventional F major) as encircled by third-related tonal regions – G flat/F sharp and D – as well as by yet more remote tonal regions. This is less about tonal conflict than about tonal architecture. As with a great cathedral, the structure of Schubert's sonata depends on holding opposing forces in balance. Commentators have also noted the long-term tonal planning, with the G flat trill in the bass a few bars into the first movement plotting a much larger story, and one whose ultimate resolution comes only in the sonata-rondo finale.

The second movement, in the distant key of C sharp minor, is cast in a large-scale ternary form, and has the measured, stately tread of other great slow movements in late Schubert (compare the C major quintet). The mood is one of detached serenity, though this gives way to a warmer, more intense and animated central section in A major. As in the other two late sonatas, the ensuing *Scherzo* and trio returns to the home key, but the finale approaches its B flat tonic more obliquely, beginning in a deceptively stable C minor before unveiling this as a dependent supertonic. This finale has other surprises in store. Listen out for the explosive *fortissimo* third theme, which appears out of the blue following one of those extended pauses that are common in late Schubert. And note too how the theme is gradually mollified and brought into line with the generally benign character of this great work.