WIGMORE HALL 125

Monday 22 September 2025
1.00pm

Simon Trpčeski piano

Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky (1840-1893)	October (Autumn song) from *The Seasons* Op. 37a (1875-6) Dumka Op. 59 (1886)
Maurice Ravel (1875-1937)	Valses nobles et sentimentales (1911) *I. Modéré, très franc • II. Assez lent, avec une expression intense • III. Modéré • IV. Assez animé • V. Presque lent, dans un sentiment intime • VI. Vif • VII. Moins vif • VIII. Epilogue. Lent*
Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky	The Nutcracker Suite Op. 71a (1892) *arranged by Mikhail Pletnev* *I. Ouverture miniature • II. Marche • III. Danse de la Fée-Dragée • IV. Danse russe (Trépak) • V. Danse arabe • VI. Danse chinoise • VII. Danse des mirlitons • VIII. Valse des fleurs*

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Histories of Russian music often focus on the handful of great composers who emerged from the empire's conservatories and music schools to create the repertoire of masterpieces that is still performed today. Yet the main task of the Russia's 19th-century musical establishments was not just the education of an elite caste of composers and virtuoso performers, but also the cultivation of a high level of performance and aesthetic appreciation on the part of ordinary individuals, the majority of whom were women. These ordinary music-lovers would often subscribe to popular journals, such as Nikolay Bernard's *Nouvelliste*. In late 1875, Bernard approached Tchaikovsky for a series of piano miniatures. Bernard paid well, and the always impecunious composer was flattered: 'I am most grateful for your courtesy and readiness to pay me such a high fee.' The 12 movements that make up *The Seasons* appeared monthly over the course of 1876 and were prefaced by short verses by Russian poets. In the case of *October* (subtitled 'Autumn Song'), the words were by Aleksey Tolstoy: 'Our poor garden is entirely covered / By yellow leaves, stirred by the wind.'

Tchaikovsky's *Dumka* was the product of another commission, this time from his French publisher, Félix Mackar. Written in 1886, it evokes a moment when Western Europe was swept by a wave of interest in all things Russian, from the novels of Turgenev, Tolstoy and Dostoyevsky to the symphonies and orchestral works of Tchaikovsky himself. Like many educated Russians of his day, Tchaikovsky spoke French fluently and idiomatically, and he visited Paris more than any other city outside Russia. The *Dumka* – which was dedicated to Antoine Marmontel, professor of piano at the Paris Conservatoire – is subtitled 'scéne rustique russe' ('Russian rustic scene'). It audibly conjures up the world of traditional folk culture from East-Central Europe. At its heart is a raucous dance, redolent of some country festivity, and this is framed by more introspective, songlike material that suggests a kind of peasant lament. Yet the 'Russianness' of *Dumka* is deceptive. The title is derived from a Slavonic word meaning 'to ponder' or 'to reflect', and by the 19th Century, composers such as Chopin and Moniuszko in Poland, Dvořák in Bohemia, and Lysenko in Ukraine had turned to the *dumka* into order to voice their melancholy feelings of frustrated patriotism.

Ravel was one of the many French composers who fell under the sway of Russian music around the turn of the century, although he preferred the rawness of Musorgsky's unruly genius or the colourful orchestral textures of Borodin and Rimsky-Korsakov to Tchaikovsky's sophisticated mastery of form and technique. Diaghilev would commission Ravel to write his sumptuous masterpiece, *Daphnis et Chloé* for the Ballets Russes in 1912, although he would later dismiss *La Valse* as 'not a ballet, but a portrait of a ballet.' Dating from 1911, the *Valses nobles et sentimentales* were conceived of as a homage to Schubert, who had written 34 *Valses sentimentales* in 1823, followed by a dozen *Valses nobles* in 1826. Ravel's previous composition for solo piano had been the diabolically difficult *Gaspard de la Nuit*, but in this sequences of waltzes, he sought something 'simpler and clearer, in which the harmony is harder and the lines of the music are revealed.'

A clue to the mood of this suite of seven waltzes and an epilogue can be found in the epigraph that Ravel borrowed from the symbolist poet, Henri de Régnier: 'the delicious and always new pleasure of a useless occupation.' There was, however, nothing so insouciant about their première. When they were first performed in Paris on 9 May 1911, the name of their composer was withheld from the programme in an attempt to force members of the audience to judge the music without prejudice. Few guessed who was behind the new work, which some listeners even conspired to find formless and unattractive. Posterity has been kinder to Ravel's delicate, wistful score, which hints at the carefully guarded emotional world of this most discreet of composers.

Premièred at St Petersburg's Mariinsky Theatre in December 1892, Tchaikovsky's ballet *The Nutcracker* was based on a tale by the German Romantic author ETA Hoffmann, in a rather romanticised version by Alexandre Dumas. Although it has gone on to become one of Tchaikovsky's most popular scores, he initially found the libretto uncongenial and struggled to come up with suitable music for the proposed sequences of dances. The death of his beloved sister, Sasha, in the spring of 1891 cast him into a depression that made working on a story of an idyllic childhood seem even more futile. However, once he had returned from a trip to North America (where he conducted at the opening of Carnegie Hall), inspiration returned, and he completed the score in the summer of 1891, orchestrating it the following January.

Even before the ballet had received its official stage première, Tchaikovsky fashioned some of its more characteristic movements into an orchestral suite for concert performance. He also made a piano transcription of the score, most likely for use in rehearsals with the dancers of the imperial theatres. In the 19th Century, piano transcriptions were often produced so that amateur instrumentalists could play their favourite pieces in the home. At the other end of the spectrum, they were also produced by leading virtuosi who could flaunt their technique on the stage and summon up an entire palate of orchestral colour with just two hands on a black-and-white keyboard. The version heard today was made by the Russian pianist, Mikhail Pletnev, who included it in the one of the programmes that catapulted him to first place at the International Tchaikovsky Competition in 1978.