

WIGMORE HALL 125

Monday 22 September 2025
7.30pm

Igor Levit piano

Franz Schubert (1797-1828)

Piano Sonata in B flat D960 (1828)

*I. Molto moderato • II. Andante sostenuto •
III. Scherzo. Allegro vivace con delicatezza •
IV. Allegro ma non troppo*

Interval

Robert Schumann (1810-1856)

Nachtstücke Op. 23 (1839-40)

*I. Mehr langsam, oft zurückhaltend (Trauerzug) •
II. Markiert und lebhaft (Kuriose Gesellschaft) •
III. Mit grosser Lebhaftigkeit (Nächtliches Gelage) •
IV. Einfach (Rundgesang mit Solostimmen)*

Fryderyk Chopin (1810-1849)

Piano Sonata No. 3 in B minor Op. 58 (1844)

*I. Allegro maestoso • II. Scherzo. Molto vivace •
III. Largo • IV. Finale. Presto non tanto*

Igor Levit appears by arrangement with Classic Concerts Management GmbH



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Schubert's Sonata in B flat was not only his last piano sonata, but possibly his last significant work of any kind. The exact chronology of the three final sonatas and other products of 1828 such as the String Quintet and the *Schwanengesang* songs cannot be authoritatively determined, but the fair copy of the B flat Sonata is inscribed '26 September 1828', only eight weeks before Schubert's death. Its position in Schubert's worklist, combined with its length and astonishingly imaginative music, has often led to its characterisation as a musical testament. This ignores the fact, however, that although Schubert knew he was terminally ill, he led a normal life for most of 1828, making elaborate plans and undertaking an energetic walking tour as late as October.

The B flat Sonata is better understood, then, not as a retrospective work but as one that points forward to how Schubert might have transformed harmony and the sonata genre had he lived longer. Its spacious first movement introduces dissonance almost from the outset, with a mysterious trill on G flat that challenges the serenity of the B flat major melody; only later does the significance of the note (or rather its enharmonic equivalent, F sharp) become clear, with Schubert's unexpected choice of key for his second subject. The second movement, an ethereal barcarolle, also exploits remote key relationships, with the tonic of C sharp minor offset by the central episode's A major and a surprise deflection into C major shortly before the end. Following the mercurial *Scherzo* with its Ländler-like trio, the finale begins with the most daring harmonic surprise of all: a 20-bar opening in the 'wrong' key of C minor, setting up instability finally resolved only in the movement's brilliant coda.

Almost ten years after Schubert's death, in October 1838, **Schumann** moved to Vienna, hoping for both professional success and a congenial base he could ultimately share with his fiancée Clara Wieck, far from her domineering father in Leipzig. But to his dismay, Schumann found Vienna 'a sleepy backwater compared to Leipzig', as his ambitions of finding a Viennese publisher for his *Neue Zeitschrift für Musik* were frustrated by political intrigues and interference from Wieck.

In March 1839, as he prepared for a humiliating return to Leipzig, he received news from his home-town of Zwickau that his beloved older brother Eduard was gravely ill. By the time he returned, Eduard was already dead: a devastating blow, compounded by Eduard's status as his last surviving close relative and sole link with Zwickau. As he wrote to Clara, his sister-in-law's news resonated strangely with the piano pieces he had already begun to write:

While composing, I kept seeing funeral processions, coffins, unhappy, despairing people, and when I sought a title I kept coming to *Leichenphantasie* [corpse-fantasy]. I was often so overcome that tears came forth and I really didn't know why. Then Therese's letter arrived, and it stood clearly before me.

When he published the set in 1840, Schumann yielded to Clara's proposal of replacing his macabre title with the ETA Hoffmann-inspired *Nachtstücke*, also suppressing the individual pieces' descriptive titles. The first piece – originally 'Trauerzug' (Funeral Procession) – depicts a cortege approaching from a distance; a few bars of fortissimo shortly before the end suggest temporary proximity, before it once more recedes. The second ('Kuriose Gesellschaft'; Strange Company), takes the funeral march's descending pattern and subjects it to an unpredictable and brilliant series of variations in the manner of the impulsive Florestan, one of the alter egos that Schumann invented under Hoffmann's inspiration to characterise the contrasting aspects of his creative character. If Florestan's agitated spirit also dominates the third piece, ('Nächtliche Gelage'; Nocturnal Revelries), then his opposite number, the wistful Eusebius, presides over the fourth ('Rundgesang mit Solostimmen'; Round with Solo Voices), which features a subtle elaboration of one of Schumann's most beautiful melodies.

Just as Schumann was composing *Nachtstücke*, **Chopin** was completing his second piano sonata, which contains perhaps the most famous of all funeral marches. It too was published in 1840: Schumann greeted it somewhat disdainfully, famously describing the sonata as 'four unruly children smuggled under this name into a place they could not otherwise have penetrated'. Ironically, given that Schumann's own smaller piano pieces have also ultimately proved much more popular than his three sonatas, he implies scepticism about Chopin's ability to translate the command of the piano so obvious from the études, nocturnes and mazurkas into mastery of the full-scale sonata.

Tonight's final work, the Sonata No. 3 in B minor, is the piece with which Chopin most comprehensively countered the criticism of Schumann and others over his supposed preference for small-scale forms. Composed in 1844 at the peak of Chopin's creative powers, during one of his last happy summers in Nohant with his French lover, the writer Aurore Dupin (known by her pen name of George Sand), the sonata is Chopin's longest solo work, and shows his determination to grapple with the genre that Beethoven and Schubert's final works had taken to such a spectacular peak.

Its first movement follows the Germanic model of sonata form, presenting two contrasting themes – the first defiant and marked by bold dotted rhythms, the second a gentle nocturne in the relative major – and treating them to a process of continuous development and transformation. The second movement pairs a brilliant *Scherzo* with a more flexible trio; the slow movement proceeds with a spaciousness that recalls the final works of Schubert, a composer by whom Chopin was deeply influenced. The finale, meanwhile, is a virtuosic sonata-rondo from which a major-key coda triumphantly emerges – a much more conventional ending to a sonata than the 90-second Presto that concluded the Sonata No. 2, but also a highly effective one.

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