

# WIGMORE HALL

Wednesday 23 April 2025  
7.30pm

Barry Douglas piano

Franz Schubert (1797-1828)

Impromptu in F minor D935 No. 1 (1827)

Impromptu in A flat D935 No. 2 (1827)

Sergey Prokofiev (1891-1953)

From *10 Pieces from Romeo and Juliet* Op. 75 (1937)

*Minuet (Arrival of the Guests) • Juliet as a Young Girl •  
Masks • Montagues and Capulets • Friar Laurence •  
Mercutio*

*Interval*

Franz Liszt (1811-1886)

Piano Sonata in B minor S178 (1852-3)

*Lento assai – Andante sostenuto –  
Allegro energico – Andante sostenuto*



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**Franz Schubert** composed his eight Impromptus during the second half of 1827, soon after completing the first part of his great monodramatic song cycle *Winterreise*. This being his penultimate year, only the first two were published before his death. The title 'Impromptu' was first added by the publisher Tobias Haslinger, who had an eye on the popularity of the recently published pieces of the same name by the Bohemian composer Jan Vofšiek. Schubert himself adopted the title for his last four Impromptus (D935), written in December. These he offered to the publisher Schott, who passed on them, claiming they were 'too difficult for trifles'. For Robert Schumann, this second set could be seen as outlining the shape of a sonata – with a sonata-form-like first movement followed by a Minuet and Trio, a theme-and-variations movement and a brilliant finale to close, returning to the F minor key of the opening Impromptu. By this token, tonight we hear an 'open' sonata. The first Impromptu launches in with a stormy descending idea, out of which emerges the outline of a new melody, couched in semiquaver figuration. This melody takes on a more songful form picked out at the tops of repeated right-hand chords. A third theme with the left hand answering itself below and above a rippling accompaniment highlights Schubert's ability to conjure beauty – even a glimpse of the sublime – from outwardly simple means. The same goes for the beguiling tune that opens the A flat Impromptu, whose lingering second beat produces a gentle lilt. The left hand continues the second-beat emphasis into the central 'Trio' section beneath elegant triplets in the right hand.

We tend to forget **Sergey Prokofiev's** earlier ballets *Chout* (1921), *Le pas d'acier* ('The Steel Step', 1926) and *The Prodigal Son* (1928–9), all commissioned by Sergey Diaghilev, the charismatic and sometimes imperious impresario of the Ballet Russes. But by far the composer's greatest success – even beyond *Cinderella* (1940) – was *Romeo and Juliet*, which he began writing just before his return to the USSR after almost 20 years abroad (first in the USA and then in Europe). The composer created the scenario with Leningrad director Sergey Radlov, originally planning a happy ending (contrary to Shakespeare's original in which both Romeo and Juliet die), on the premise that 'living people can dance, the dead cannot'. After failed attempts to stage it at the Kirov Theatre in Leningrad and then at the Bolshoi in Moscow, *Romeo and Juliet* was eventually premièred in 1939 in Brno, Czechoslovakia, receiving its first Russian performance only in 1940. In the absence of an imminent performance, in 1936 Prokofiev drew two orchestral suites from the ballet (a third followed in 1946), and the following year he issued 10 Pieces for solo piano.

The stately *Minuet* accompanies the arrival of the guests at the Capulets' ball, its contrasting episodes marking a sequence of entrances. *Juliet as a Young Girl* follows Juliet excitedly preparing with her nurse for the evening event. She becomes more thoughtful as she sees her beauty reflected in the mirror. Spiked with

bounding left-hand chords, *Masks* depicts Romeo and his friends Mercutio and Benvolio donning their disguises in order to gate-crash the party. With its piledriving bass chords and its severe dotted rhythms, the popular *Montagues and Capulets* demonstrates the bitter feuding of the two rival houses. The slower, central section is the intimate dance of Juliet and her family-approved suitor Paris. The music for the priest Friar Laurence captures both the sanctity of Romeo and Juliet's marriage, over which he officiates and the priest's own humanity in agreeing to conduct the clandestine ceremony. Tonight's sequence concludes with the extrovert Mercutio's dance, the only movement from these 10 Pieces not to feature in any of Prokofiev's three orchestral suites from the ballet.

'You do not seem to know that for the past 26 years I have altogether ceased to be regarded as a pianist; I have for a long time not given any concerts, and have only very occasionally played the piano in public.' It's hard to credit that these would be the words (in 1874) of **Franz Liszt**, the *ne plus ultra* of virtuoso pianists – the inventor of the piano recital and a defining figure in Romantic art. His fame had spread all over Europe and beyond, his performances hailed as beguiling, breathtaking experiences that caused ladies to swoon. But his touring life was interrupted when in 1835 he left France with the Countess Marie d'Agoult (she was already married, hence their affair caused a scandal). And then in 1847, after meeting Princess Carolyn Sayn-Wittgenstein, at her suggestion, he decided to concentrate on composing. This meant that Liszt never performed his Sonata in B minor (completed in 1853) in public – though he played it once to Brahms who, unbelievably, fell asleep. The première was given by Hans von Bülow (who later married Liszt's daughter Cosima); he wrote afterwards to Liszt: 'Your sonata had an unexpected, almost unanimous success, which cannot fail to bear fruit.' Arranged in a single movement, the work's form can be seen as simultaneously a complete sonata (with four movements: *Allegro*, *Adagio*, *Scherzo* and finale) and a single sonata-form movement (exposition, development and recapitulation). Liszt's manipulation of the themes gives the overall work both a tight cohesion and a seamless flow. But these themes are treated more like generative cells that infuse the piece as they ingeniously transform, return and combine. Within this the moods span a universal range, from the diabolical to the heavenly. Though this sonata was only adopted by pianists in relatively recent history, it is now one of the great pillars of the repertoire – this piece of 'absolute' music (surprisingly for Liszt, it was not linked to any narrative) has acquired symbolic status. And tonight, in Barry Douglas's hands, there's a historic link that goes beyond the symbolic: Barry's teacher, Felicitas LeWinter, was a pupil of Emil von Sauer, who was himself a pupil of Liszt.

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