

WIGMORE HALL

Monday 23 June 2025
7.30pm

Nicolas Namoradze piano

Aleksandr Skryabin (1872-1915)

Piano Sonata No. 10 Op. 70 (1912-3)

Johann Sebastian Bach (1685-1750)

Prelude and Fugue in E from *The Well-tempered Clavier* Book II BWV878 (c.1740)

Aleksandr Skryabin

Fugue in E minor WoO. 20 (1892)

Johann Sebastian Bach

Prelude and Fugue in G sharp minor from *The Well-tempered Clavier* Book I BWV863 (1722)

Aleksandr Skryabin

Piano Sonata No. 2 in G sharp minor Op. 19 'Sonata Fantasy' (1892-7)

I. Andante • II. Presto

Interval

Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827)

Piano Sonata No. 29 in B flat Op. 106 'Hammerklavier' (1817-8)

I. Allegro • II. Scherzo. Assai vivace •

III. Adagio sostenuto • IV. Largo. Allegro risoluto



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The programme begins with the elusive presence of Schubert, evoked as a tantalising Will-o'-the-Wisp. In 'Irrlicht', from his song cycle *Winterreise*, we enter a state of suspended animation, ushered in by a mystical augmented triad on F sharp – a lilting, teasing question left unresolved. This very motif reappears as the guiding light of Skryabin's Tenth Sonata, functioning as his own 'Irrlicht', the will-o'-the-wisp that tempts the wanderer through woods and marshes. Heard seven times throughout the sonata, the motif leads us into ever-new sonic adventures.

Like his earlier Second Sonata, this work draws its inspiration from nature. Skryabin claimed it evokes 'the sounds and moods of the forest'. He also gave rise to its occasional nickname, the 'Insect Sonata', remarking that 'the whole sonata is made of insects'. Yet these insects are radiant creatures, born of the sun. Light plays a central role in the music's unfolding, culminating in feverish trills over which Skryabin inscribes the instruction *puissant, radieux* – 'powerful, radiant'. His imagery was no mere metaphor: while performing these passages, he remarked to Leonid Sabaneyev, 'Here is blinding light... as if the sun has approached.'

The sonata builds toward a climactic dissolution in its final 'dance', a moment when Skryabin's own description seems most vivid: 'Everything receives wings, everything gets into an upswing, everything becomes thinner'. Published in 1913, the Tenth is among the clearest examples of sonata form in Skryabin's late single-movement works, yet it offers the variety we often expect from multi-movement structures. A scherzo-like character surfaces in the vertiginous dance of the coda. After the work's ascent into immateriality, Schubert's original motif re-emerges – perhaps to haunt us, perhaps to beckon us toward new adventures.

Although the sonata's opening recalls Schubert, the deeper spirit guiding tonight's programme is undoubtedly Bach. His contrapuntal technique influenced Beethoven profoundly, and in its own mystical way, left its mark on Skryabin as well. This concert explores the evolution of counterpoint and expressive keyboard writing over three centuries, demonstrating how the fugue – especially in the hands of Bach – served not just as a structural device, but as a fertile ground for expressive and innovative music making.

Skryabin's own approach to counterpoint was deeply mystical. He once wrote: 'Harmony and melody are two sides of the same coin. The melody is an unfurled harmony; the harmony is a compressed melody.' His youthful Fugue in E minor WoO. 20 reveals an early interest in fugal writing, despite his later departure from strict contrapuntal styles. Classical in form but rich in Romantic expression, this short work hints at his later mystical language through its introspective intensity. It also suggests a path not taken. After studying with Sergei Taneyev – a composer renowned for his rigorous contrapuntal techniques – Skryabin would soon leave behind these academic methods, progressing toward the freer harmonic style of his *Sonata-Fantasia* in G sharp minor Op. 19, his well-loved Second Sonata.

This sonata unfolds in two movements, reflecting a bipartite design that Skryabin would later revisit in his Fourth Sonata, before eventually merging all movements into

single continuous forms in his Fifth through Tenth sonatas. The motives and themes of the Second Sonata continually spin out delicate contrapuntal ideas into intense, virtuosic climaxes. In a way, the two-movement structure mirrors the familiar pairing of a prelude and fugue.

While the Tenth Sonata evoked the forest, the Second is said to reflect Skryabin's impressions of the sea. Critic Arnold Alshvang dubbed it the 'Sea Sonata'. The first movement conjures the tranquillity of moonlit waters, while the second – rising from an oscillating figure that lingers from the opening – is shaped by what Yuliy Engel described as the turbulence of the sea. Dating the composition of the *Sonata-Fantasia* is difficult due to Skryabin's frequent revisions, partial performances, and repeated announcements of its imminent completion. Although a complete version was performed in Paris in 1896, he continued to revise it. The first movement grows increasingly contrapuntal as it unfolds, with its developmental processes pushing beyond conventional sonata form – a sign of the structural freedom Skryabin would later fully embrace.

To situate Skryabin's works within the wider historical arc of counterpoint, tonight's programme includes two Preludes and Fugues from **Bach's** *Well-Tempered Clavier*. These works represent the gold standard of contrapuntal writing and profoundly shaped the generations of composers who followed. Both also indicate the keys of the works that follow them.

The Prelude and Fugue in E BWV878 (Book II) is characterised by a graceful, flowing prelude whose transparent textures pave the way for a fugue of equal lyricism and clarity. Both offer an ideal introduction to Skryabin's early fugue and foreshadow the harmonic world of the *Sonata-Fantasia*.

In contrast, the Prelude and Fugue in G sharp minor BWV863 (Book I) presents a more brooding character. Its dense, chromatic prelude and emotionally-charged fugue create an atmosphere of profound intensity – an ideal entry point into the turbulent seas of Skryabin's *Sonata-Fantasia*.

The programme concludes with **Beethoven's** monumental 'Hammerklavier' Sonata in B flat, Op. 106, a towering achievement in both piano technique and musical expression. Spanning four movements, it demands not only technical mastery but also deep emotional insight. According to his pupil Carl Czerny, Beethoven considered the *Adagio* – the vast, meditative third movement – the most heartfelt music he ever wrote. The finale, a colossal triple fugue, integrates Bach's contrapuntal rigor with Beethoven's own late-period innovations and spiritual vision.

Ultimately, this programme is a journey through the power and versatility of counterpoint. From Bach's crystalline fugues, through Beethoven's spiritual profundity, to Skryabin's radiant mysticism, each work reflects a different chapter in the story of how music can be both structurally intricate and emotionally transcendent.

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