

# WIGMORE HALL

Monday 23 September 2024  
1.00pm

Alim Beisembayev piano

Johann Sebastian Bach (1685-1750)

Italian Concerto in F BWV971 (pub. 1735)  
*I. [Allegro] • II. Andante • III. Presto*

Fryderyk Chopin (1810-1849)

Barcarolle in F sharp Op. 60 (1845-6)

Claude Debussy (1862-1918)

Images, Series 1 (1901-5)  
*Reflets dans l'eau • Hommage à Rameau •  
Mouvement*

Igor Stravinsky (1882-1971)

3 movements from *The Firebird Suite* (1919) arranged by  
*Guido Agosti*  
*I. Danse infernale • II. Berceuse • III. Finale*



This concert is being broadcast on BBC Radio 3



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Between 1731 and 1741, **Bach** published four volumes of his *Clavier-Übung* ('Keyboard Practice' or 'Keyboard Exercise'), each illustrating his mastery of various forms, styles and techniques. The first volume contained the 6 *Partitas*, with the second consisting of the *Italian Concerto* and the *Overture in the French Style*. The third volume included pieces for organ, and the final one – the *Goldberg Variations*. The full title of the second part of the *Clavier-Übung* (1735) sheds light on his intended audience: 'Keyboard Practice Consisting in a Concerto after the Italian Taste and an Overture after the French Manner for a Harpsichord with Two Manuals, Composed for Music Lovers, to Refresh Their Spirits, by Johann Sebastian Bach, Kapellmeister to His Highness the Prince of Anhalt-Cöthen and Director Chori Musici Lipsiensis.'

Bach had served as choir director in Leipzig (*Lipsia* in Latin) since 1727, also holding an honorary position at Cöthen. His interest in Italian music goes back, however, to his time at Weimar, where he had made a number of transcriptions of orchestral works by Vivaldi and other Baroque masters. Cast in three contrasting movements, the *Italian Concerto* was originally conceived for two-manual harpsichord, and Bach used *forte* ('loud') and *piano* ('quiet') marks to illustrate the dialogue between orchestra and soloist.

In his *Italian Concerto*, Bach brought the flair and drama of the Mediterranean to the northern world of Luther and the Protestant reformation. He also attempted to convey the effect of an instrumental ensemble on a single keyboard instrument – originally a harpsichord, but here, a modern grand piano. For his part, **Debussy** achieves a rather different kind of alchemy – that of transforming painting into sound. As he once wrote to a friend: 'I am almost as fond of pictures as I am of music'. All in all, he wrote three works with the title *Images* – a set of three pieces for orchestra (1905-12), and two albums for solo piano. But Debussy was never interested in merely 'translating' words or images into music; rather, he used such prompts to inspire the performer's inventiveness and stir the listener's imagination.

The first book of *Images* dates from 1901-5 (the second was written in 1907), and also consists of three pieces. The first – *Reflets dans l'eau* ('Reflections in the water') – is the most obviously pictorial, and its swirling textures seem to conjure up the world of the Impressionists, whether painting the Seine, the Thames, or Monet's garden at Giverny. The label 'Impressionist' had, though, been first hurled as an insult (by a critic who was incensed by the sketchiness of Monet's *Impression, Sunrise* in 1874), and Debussy was himself rather sceptical about its relevance for an understanding of his music. As much as he could be considered a modern painter in sound, he also had a profound affinity with classicism, and in *Hommage à Rameau*, he evokes the courtly ceremony of *ancien régime* France. *Mouvement* is just that – pure motion and nothing else. A filigree

toccata that dances effortlessly across the keyboard, it suggests that despite our wish to discern analogies between the various art forms, they each operate according to their own laws.

In 1915, Debussy edited the piano music of **Chopin**, dedicating his own set of 12 *Etudes* to the memory of the Polish composer who had lived for so long in the French capital. Debussy had a particular fondness for Chopin's *Barcarolle*, in which the simple sounds of a Venetian gondolier's song are miraculously translated into music of virtuosic *élan*. Written in 1845-6, it is one of a series of strikingly ambitious works Chopin wrote close before his untimely death at the age of just 39. Plenty of composers had written charming barcarolles before – most notably Mendelssohn, in his *Songs without Words* for solo piano, and even Schubert in some of his songs – yet it took Chopin to elevate the genre to a new level of complexity and expressivity.

One of **Stravinsky's** most gorgeously colourful scores, *The Firebird* was commissioned by Diaghilev for his 1910 Ballets Russes season in Paris. Diaghilev had first approached Tchernin, who was too busy, and then Lyadov, who proved to be too lazy. Instead, Diaghilev turned to Stravinsky, then a young and little-known former student of Rimsky-Korsakov with few works to his name. The risk paid off handsomely, and the success of *The Firebird* launched a career that would take Stravinsky from Russia to France and eventually the United States. Stravinsky would later make three orchestral suites from *The Firebird* for concert performance, but the version of three of its movements for solo piano heard here was created by the Italian pianist **Guido Agosti**.

Agosti dedicated his arrangements to his teacher, Busoni, famous for his extravagant piano transcriptions of the music of Bach. But Agosti's main source of inspiration was none other than Stravinsky himself, who had arranged his 3 *Movements from Petrushka* for solo piano in 1921, dedicating them to the great Polish-born pianist Arthur Schnitke. Based on Stravinsky's second ballet for Diaghilev, this was a dazzling piece of virtuoso writing, pushing the performer's technique to its very limits and transcending the mechanical limitations of the piano so that it might sound like a living, breathing orchestra. Agosti matched this with his equally ambitious transcription of three scenes from *The Firebird*. In the *Danse infernale*, Stravinsky summons up the demonic world of the ballet's villainous antihero, Kashchey (the 'Deathless'). After this, the *Berceuse* offers a moment of somnolent respite. And in the *Finale*, the ballet's hero, Prince Ivan, finally gets to marry his beloved princess, all thanks to the Firebird. The real magic belongs, of course, to Stravinsky's inventive storytelling – and to Agosti's daring transmutation of orchestral colour into pianistic brilliance.

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