

WIGMORE HALL 125

Friday 24 July 2026
7.30pm

Boris Giltburg piano

Johann Sebastian Bach (1685-1750) Chaconne in D minor (1720) *arranged by Ferruccio Busoni*

Franz Liszt (1811-1886) Piano Sonata in B minor S178 (1852-3)

I. Lento assai

II. Andante sostenuto

III. Allegro energico

IV. Andante sostenuto

Interval

Sergey Rachmaninov (1873-1943) Prelude in F sharp minor Op. 23 No. 1 (1901-3)

Prelude in D minor Op. 23 No. 3

Prelude in G minor Op. 23 No. 5

Prelude in A flat Op. 23 No. 8

Prelude in E flat Op. 23 No. 6

Prelude in C minor Op. 23 No. 7

Maurice Ravel (1875-1937) Gaspard de la nuit (1908)

I. Ondine. Lent

II. Le gibet. Très lent

III. Scarbo. Modéré



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Bach's Second Partita for solo violin seems at first the most modest of the whole set of sonatas and partitas for unaccompanied violin – the *Gigue* comes to its conclusion after about a quarter of an hour. Bach's first audiences, doubtless unprovided with printed programmes, had no way of knowing they were only half-way through, and their wonder must have grown and grown as the magnificent *Chaconne* unwound itself majestically. The medical missionary and Bach scholar Albert Schweitzer thought that 'out of a single theme Bach conjures a whole world'. World enough, and time, for composers and audiences ever since to take the mighty ending on its own, and on its own terms. Both Mendelssohn and Schumann wrote piano accompaniments to Bach's violin part, which must have eased the path for many an over-tasked fiddler. Brahms arranged the actual violin part to be played on the piano, thoughtfully limiting himself to the left hand alone, in order to match the 'limitations' of an unaccompanied violin. He told Clara Schumann that it was 'one of the most wonderful and incomprehensible pieces of music'. The pianist Ernst Pauer and the composer Joachim Raff both arranged the *Chaconne* at about the same time as Brahms, but for two-handed piano. Raff's additions are comparatively modest: Pauer makes the mistake of adding busy counterpoints from the very beginning, destroying Bach's careful build-up of activity. By general consent, Busoni's piano version of the 1890s is the classic.

Liszt began an earlier version of his Sonata in B minor when he arrived in Weimar in 1848, retiring from his concert tours into the more settled life of a composer. This first fruit of that transition is perhaps also the pinnacle of Liszt's compositional achievements. There were still many great works to come, including works of great harmonic innovation, but in this first great gush of creativity, Liszt got everything off his chest: the diversified single movement, the transformation of themes, the sonata-within-a-sonata, the ambiguity between programme (if any – Faust? Garden of Eden? Paradise Lost?) and pure musical architecture – and the mastery of pianistic effect. Apart from private performances by Liszt (during one of which the young Brahms fell asleep), the first performance was given in 1857 by Hans von Bülow, who was about to marry Liszt's daughter, Cosima.

Despite isolated examples from such composers as Handel and Beethoven, the genre of independent Prelude really took off with Chopin's Op. 28. Bach's Preludes are nearly always followed by the words 'and Fugue', which makes perfect sense of the word 'prelude'. (Chorale Preludes, in theory, were followed by a Chorale.) Chopin, who didn't write fugues, kept just the 'in every key' aspect of Bach's 48 for his book of Preludes: a rather flimsy justification for the title. Of the many composers who seized upon the new genre, **Rachmaninov** and his classmate Skryabin were

amongst the few who noticed that 'in every key' aspect. Skryabin's 24 Preludes Op. 11 (1896) were exemplary, neatly arranged in pairs with the same key signature. His six preludes of Op. 13 together with the five of Op. 15 set off well, but included two preludes in E major while the next set included one in G flat major and one in the homosonic F sharp major. The final seven preludes don't mention 'key' at all, since by 1914 Skryabin's music had become atonal, though sensuously and attractively so. Rachmaninov's procedure was complicated by a habit of economy and the fact that his early hit, the C sharp minor Prelude of 1892, had been a solitary exemplar. His 10 Preludes Op. 23 (1901-3) added ten more keys, rather randomly, and the 13 Preludes Op. 32 (1910) polished off the complete set of 24 keys: $1+10+13 = 24$. There is therefore no compelling reason to play them complete, or in order, and it's refreshing in an age of boxed sets, of complete this and integral that, to hear only a pianist's favourites.

Maurice Ravel's father, an engineer, married a girl from the Basque country when he went to build railways in Spain after the Franco-Prussian War of 1870. Maurice's younger brother, Édouard, became an engineer like his father, but Maurice went to the Paris Conservatoire, where he won first prize for piano at the age of 16. Unfortunately, his interest in the musical avant-garde of the time was not to the taste of the Conservatoire management, and he was expelled in 1895. By 1897, when he was re-admitted, it was clear to him that he would never be as good a pianist as his fellow students, Alfred Cortot and Ricardo Viñes, and in any case, he wanted to be a composer – so he indulged his life-time dislike of practising. His continued dedication to the avant-garde earned him the distinction of a second expulsion and a full-blown Parisian scandal about not winning the Prix de Rome – *l'affaire Ravel*.

Meanwhile, in 1901 he had written the piece that he described as 'the origin of all the pianistic novelties that have been noticed in my work' – *Jeux d'eau* (Fountains). The delicacy of half-touched notes, of key repetition, the swirling arpeggios that embody his extended harmonies, doubtless discovered by hand, as it were, at the piano – one recalls his admonition to his student Vaughan Williams 'how can you find new harmonies if you don't have a piano in your lodgings?' – all are here already. Ravel may not have practised much, but he knew all Liszt's technical tricks and more, and they are all incorporated in the most fiendish of all his works, *Gaspard de la nuit*. *Ondine* is the Gallic equivalent of the Lorelei – Sirens all. *The Gibbet* is self-explanatory, even without the poem's desert, walled city and setting sun. *Scarbo* is a goblin, perhaps more mischievous than malign.

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