

WIGMORE HALL

Sunday 24 September 2023
7.30pm

Marc-André Hamelin piano

Charles Edward Ives (1874-1954)

Piano Sonata No. 2 'Concord, Mass.' (1909-15, rev. by 1947)

I. Emerson • II. Hawthorne • III. The Alcotts • IV. Thoreau

Interval

Robert Schumann (1810-1856)

Waldszenen Op. 82 (1848-9)

*Eintritt • Jäger auf der Lauer • Einsame Blumen •
Verrufene Stelle • Freundliche Landschaft • Herberge •
Vogel als Prophet • Jagdlied • Abschied*

Maurice Ravel (1875-1937)

Gaspard de la nuit (1908)

I. Ondine • II. Le gibet • III. Scarbo

CLASSIC *fm* Wigmore Hall £5 tickets for Under 35s supported by Media Partner Classic FM



Our Audience Fund provides essential unrestricted support for our artistic and learning programmes, connecting thousands of people with music locally, nationally, and internationally. We rely on the generosity of our audience to raise £150,000 each year to support this work. Your gifts are, and continue to be, indispensable.

To donate, please visit <https://wigmore-hall.org.uk/support-us/wigmore-hall-audience-fund>

Wigmore Hall is a no smoking venue. No recording or photographic equipment may be taken into the auditorium nor used in any other part of the Hall without the prior written permission of the management.

In accordance with the requirements of City of Westminster persons shall not be permitted to stand or sit in any of the gangways intersecting the seating, or to sit in any other gangways. If standing is permitted in the gangways at the sides and rear of the seating, it shall be limited to the number indicated in the notices exhibited in those positions.

Disabled Access and Facilities - full details from 020 7935 2141.

Wigmore Hall is equipped with a 'Loop' to help hearing aid users receive clear sound without background noise. Patrons can use this facility by switching hearing aids to 'T'.



Please ensure that watch alarms, mobile phones and any other electrical devices which can become audible are switched off. Phones on a vibrate setting can still be heard, please switch off.

The Wigmore Hall Trust Registered Charity No. 1024838
36 Wigmore Street, London W1U 2BP • Wigmore-hall.org.uk • John Gilhooly Director

Wigmore Hall Royal Patron HRH The Duke of Kent, KG
Honorary Patrons Aubrey Adams OBE; André and Rosalie Hoffmann; Louise Kaye; Kohn Foundation; Mr and Mrs Paul Morgan



Supported using public funding by
**ARTS COUNCIL
ENGLAND**



The first half of this evening's programme is given over to the mammoth 'Concord' Sonata of **Charles Edward Ives**. Named for the Massachusetts town most associated with the writers of American transcendentalism, each part is named for a key figure in the movement, creating in Ives's words 'an attempt to present (one person's) impression of the spirit of transcendentalism.' Rather than being purely programmatic, each movement has a defined expressive character, all coming together in a form similar to the standard four movement symphony. *Emerson* is a long, thoughtful movement in which Ives envisions the writer as 'a mountain guide so intensely on the lookout for the trail of his star that he has no time to stop and retrace his footprints.' *Hawthorne* is a scherzo in the style of the writer's lighter adventures, swerving wildly from carnival to ragtime to hymn. The emotional heart of the sonata though is *The Alcotts*, its overtly lyrical beauty an image of domestic music making and family life. For Ives's personal hero, *Thoreau*, he describes 'an autumn day of Indian summer at Walden'.

In any other way however, this is an extremely unusual work, most conspicuously in the way it is intentionally unfinished. Between its beginning in 1912 and Ives's death in 1954, there were roughly 14 unpublished versions, two published versions, and a studio recording of Ives playing/improvising the piece. 'I may always have the pleasure of not finishing it,' he wrote. While most composers, like Bruckner, rewrite their music to tweak or perfect it, Ives here does the opposite and designs the piece to be in constant flux.

There are very few bar lines, leaving rhythm and flexibility up to the performer and the moment. There are optional contributions from viola and flute, leftovers from an original conception of the first movement as a quasi-piano concerto, and a 37cm piece of wood is requested to play note clusters in the second movement. Yet for all this invention, the piece stays entirely whole. Themes, including many statements of the opening of Beethoven's Fifth Symphony and the 'Hammerklavier' sonata, tie all the movements together. Contrast is the keyword in this piece; one moment of crushing dissonance could give way to meditative hymns, or a popular song. Nothing is impossible.

Again a collection of scenes and impressions, **Schumann's** *Waldszenen* differs perhaps in size but not depth. The cycle is the last he wrote for solo piano and was composed in a frenzy of activity over the new year of 1849. For Romantic Germany, the forest was a place of peace and rest but also of the unknown and dangerous, and man's relationship to wilderness and this uneasy cohabitation is a major theme of the work as a whole.

The gentler sides occupy the majority of the cycle, such as the thoughtful entry into the forest (*Eintritt*), the gentle swaying of the lonely flower (*Einsame Blumen*), and the rippling joy of *Freundliche Landschaft*. *Herberge* oozes the indoor comfort of a cozy fireside at the forest inn. The character of the hunter, whether lying in wait (*Jäger auf der Lauer*) or blowing his horn through the forest (*Jagdlied*) is always something of a storybook figure. But darkness and mystery lie in wait as the birds flutter in the trees, urging caution, in the cycle's most famous movement (*Vogel als Prophet*). Is this suddenly Debussy? The sense of mystery and danger is so palpable, and the central chorale section gives this a hushed, almost holy character, a reminder that for all the joy in these pieces, we are hearing from late Schumann. The twitchy nervousness of *Verrufene Stelle* contains an even darker message, with a prefixed poem by Hebbel above the score. The red shine of the flowers comes not from the sunlight through the trees, but from the glow of the forest floor soaked in human blood. *Abschied* bids a thoughtful goodbye to round off the whole set as we leave the forest.

If the 'Concord' Sonata is a testament to wild freedom and improvisation, then the macabre triptych of *Gaspard de la Nuit* is a testament to the jewel-like construction of **Ravel's** writing. The combination not just of detailed compositional perfection, but also of extreme pianistic virtuosity, proves this one of Ravel's greatest works for solo piano. Again, we have individual scenes, here all taken from a collection of darkly fantastical poems by the poet Aloysius Bertrand.

The first is of the water nymph *Ondine*, who, from her lake, tempts the watcher to come under the water and marry her to rule over her watery kingdom together, in so doing drowning himself. When he replies that he already loves a mortal woman (the piece's climactic passage) she sheds a tear, laughs, and vanishes into a white spray.

The tension then ratchets up for *Le gilet*, where at night the distant tolling of bells from the city walls sounds without stopping. They ring as the body of a hanged man on the gallows sways back and forth in the night air, inspiring a composition of incredible economy and unbearable anxiety. Then immediately on to the goblin *Scarbo*, the piece Ravel infamously wrote to be even harder than Balakirev's Romantic showpiece *Islamey*. What Ravel writes, in contrast, is a highly taut musical depiction of the skitterings and scrapings of the goblin in dark corners of the room, reflecting too the terror of the person locked in with him. At the piece's grandest climax, Scarbo reveals himself, growing and growing to his full height, when suddenly he turns transparent, and vanishes...

© Mark Rogers 2023

Reproduction and distribution is strictly prohibited.