

WIGMORE HALL

Sunday 25 February 2024
3.00pm

Roman Arndt tenor
Llŷr Williams piano

Georgy Sviridov (1915-1998)

6 Romances on Texts by Pushkin (1935)

*The woods have shed their crimson garb •
Winter journey • To My Nanny • Winter evening •
Foreboding • Driving towards Izhory*

Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky (1840-1893) 6 Romances Op. 73 (1893)

*We sat together • Night • On this Moonlit Night •
The sun has set • Amid Sombre Days •
Again, as before, alone*

Francis Poulenc (1899-1963)

Airs chantés (1927-8)

Air romantique • Air champêtre • Air grave • Air vif



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It is the middle of the 1930s. Stalin has consolidated his totalitarian rule. Dissent is crushed and waves of arrests are followed by summary execution or imprisonment in the harsh conditions of the camps. Socialist realism is imposed on the arts and censorship severely limits what artists can discuss. Yet it is precisely at this moment that a grandiose celebration of Russia's greatest poet is planned across the length and breadth of the Soviet Union. 1937 marks the centenary of the death of Alexander Pushkin, and composers rush to set his words to music.

One of these was the 20-year-old **Sviridov**, then a student at the Leningrad Conservatory. Born in the Kursk region in 1915, Sviridov moved to Leningrad in 1929, before taking lessons from Shostakovich in Moscow between 1936 and 1941. Although he would later complain of a lack of recognition, he in fact became one of the Soviet Union's most decorated composers (his rousing music for the 1965 film *Time, Forward!* became famous as the theme of a primetime Soviet news programme). His *6 Romances on Texts by Pushkin* date from 1935 and took the world of Russian music by storm.

For a work by such a young composer, the *6 Romances* are strangely solemn and philosophical. Rejecting the kind of love poetry that had been so central to Russian song, Sviridov instead selected a sequence of brooding, meditative texts that convey something of the poet's moods in the second half of the 1820s. In 1820, Pushkin had been exiled for four years to the southern regions of the Russian Empire on account of his political radicalism. He was then confined to his family's estate until 1826, before being allowed back to the capital under the direct surveillance of the tsarist authorities. The first five of Sviridov's songs find Pushkin in pensive mood, reflecting on his sense of isolation, the fading of his youthful dreams, and the uncertainty of the future, all set against the transcendent beauty of the natural world. Sviridov responds to Pushkin's poems with music that is bleakly haunting, looking back above all to Musorgsky, rather than Glinka, Tchaikovsky or Rachmaninov. Only the final song seems to offer any solace.

One of the most important aspects of Sviridov's cycle is its sense of dramatic coherence and narrative continuity. As archetypically Russian as it might sound, it clearly also harks back to German Romantic cycles by Schubert and Schumann. Similarly, in his *6 Romances* Op. 73, **Tchaikovsky** explored the possibility of fashioning a series of individual songs into a single, overarching whole. It was not the first time he had set words by just one poet – he had turned to verses by Grand Duke Konstantin Romanov in his *6 Romances* Op. 63, in 1887. But the Op. 73 songs are his first – and only – attempt at a cycle in any meaningful sense. They were also some of the

final works he completed before his sudden death from cholera in the autumn of 1893.

Although Tchaikovsky never met Daniil Rathaus, a young law student from Kyiv, their brief correspondence is surprisingly intimate. Rathaus had first written to Tchaikovsky in August 1892, enclosing a number of poems that he thought might be suitable for musical setting. It was not until late April and early May the following year that Tchaikovsky did so, and the resulting songs hint at artistic developments that were, sadly, to go unexplored. The cycle has a striking sense of thematic coherence, and the narrative of lost love that it traces is reinforced by the use of recurring set of musical motifs, as well as a carefully planned harmonic structure that binds its individual numbers into a satisfying whole.

The *6 Romances* were dedicated to Nikolay Figner, who had starred as Hermann in the première of *The Queen of Spades* in 1890, and there is certainly something theatrical about the emotional world they inhabit. But it is Tchaikovsky's correspondence with Rathaus that gives a clue to their significance. As he wrote to the young poet: 'I hate it when people try to peer into my soul. In my music I claim extreme sincerity; I am on the whole inclined to sad songs, yet at the same time, like you, at least in recent years, I want for nothing and can generally consider myself a happy person!' To read the *6 Romances* autobiographically would be to confuse art and life in a way that the composer always found irksome.

Sviridov clearly loved and revered Pushkin. Tchaikovsky found much to admire in Rathaus's student verse. **Poulenc** too had an extremely fine literary sensibility, yet he thoroughly detested the poetry of Jean Moréas, and in his four *Airs chantés*, set out to commit 'every possible sacrilege.' Moréas was, in fact, the French pen-name of the Greek-born Ioannis Papadiamantopoulos, whose poetry found little favour with the young iconoclasts of the 1920s. The *Airs chantés* date from 1927 and 1928, and in them, Poulenc does his witty best to go against everything the poems seem to cry out for. Jagged vocal leaps, breakneck speeds (the first is marked to be sung 'very fast with the wind in one's face'), deliberate infractions of the rules of French prosody, parodic allusions to the world of the cabaret and the musical hall – all these make for songs that demand as much of their audiences as they do of their performers. They were also a canny investment on the part of the composer. Poulenc had accepted a commission from the publisher François Hepp, who was rather fonder of Moréas than he was himself. An advance of 1000 francs and handsome royalties thereafter were the unexpected reward for such an ungallant *jeu d'esprit*.

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