WIGMORE HALL

Friday 25 July 2025
7.30pm

Christian Blackshaw piano

Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky (1840-1893)

The Seasons Op. 37a (1875-6)

January (By the fireside) • *February (Carnival)* • *March (Song of the lark)* • *April (Snowdrop)* • *May (White nights)* • *June (Barcarolle)* • *July (The reaper's song)* • *August (The harvest)* • *September (The hunt)* • *October (Autumn song)* • *November (Troika)* • *December (Christmas)*

Interval

Fryderyk Chopin (1810-1849)

Mazurka in G minor Op. 24 No. 1 (1833)

Mazurka in C Op. 24 No. 2 (1833)

Mazurka in A flat Op. 24 No. 3 (1833)

Mazurka in B flat minor Op. 24 No. 4 (1833)

Franz Schubert (1797-1828)

4 Impromptus D899 (1827)

I. Allegro molto moderato • *II. Allegro* • *III. Andante* • *IV. Allegretto*

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Tchaikovsky's 12 pieces, now known as *The Seasons*, were originally published one by one in 1876 in the monthly magazine *Nuvellist*. The First Piano Concerto had just received its première (in Boston), and Tchaikovsky worked on his first ballet, *Swan Lake*, while he was composing *The Seasons*: at the height of his powers, then. The pieces were published as a complete set in 1886. The subtitles and the opus number were chosen by the publisher, the latter to emphasise the fact that they were written around the time of Op. 37 – the Grand Sonata, which appeared in 1878. As to 'Seasons', usually four in number, after all, Fanny Mendelssohn's set of 12 month-pieces of 1841 had already used the title 'The Year'.

Chopin only really got going with mazurkas after he'd left Poland for good. At the time of the Warsaw Uprising against the colonial Russians in November 1830, he happened to be in Vienna, and he never managed to get back home. The most significant thing about the Mazurkas he began to write, stuck in Vienna, was that they were not Polonaises. The Polonaise was the smart-society Polish dance, the one that was welcome in the concert hall, suitably perfumed. Even Bach wrote that sort of Polonaise. But the Mazurka, much more suspect and folksy, became Chopin's private Poland: and once he'd settled in Paris, it marked him as an Eastern Exotic. Op. 24 was composed in 1833.

Wilhelm von Lenz went to Chopin specifically to study the Mazurkas. Op. 33 No. 3 is the subject of his best story. Chopin was giving him a lesson on it, when in came the opera composer Meyerbeer, so full of himself that he didn't even knock. '"That's in 2/4", said Meyerbeer. Chopin beat triple time on the piano with his pencil, his eyes blazing. "2/4", repeated Meyerbeer. "It's in 3/4", shouted Chopin, who rarely raised his voice above a murmur. He sat at the piano himself, counting aloud, and stamping the beat with his foot, but Meyerbeer stuck to his guns, and they parted on bad terms.'

Some pianists steeped in the mazurkas occasionally shorten the second and third beats so that the two add up to roughly the same as the *first* beat. Meyerbeer's problem was that he owned a metronome, I dare say. Sir Charles Halle, Manchester's most musical eponym, studied mazurkas with Chopin when he was a young German called Karl Halle. He was obviously not so annoying as Meyerbeer, because he once counted 4-in-a-bar while Chopin played Mazurkas, and Chopin only laughed.

The Four Impromptus Op. 90 (D899) were composed in the second half of 1827, after **Schubert** had composed the first part of *Winterreise* and enjoyed a holiday in Graz. The first two impromptus were published straight away, but the remaining two had to wait for 30 years, and even then, No. 3 was published in the wrong key – G instead of G flat. The manuscript has a pencilled note from the publisher, telling the engraver to change the key and even the time-signature – Schubert had used a rare signature, a C for common time (4/4), cut in two by a vertical line to denote 2/2, and then the same sign immediately repeated, to indicate 4/2 – 4 minims in a bar, allowing the accompaniment to be written as quavers (just one beam) instead of semiquavers (two beams, which always looks fast), as would have happened in 4/4. The vandal publisher simply pencilled in twice as many bar-lines for the first two lines of the manuscript, leaving the engraver to get on with it for the rest of the piece. In the 1857 publication, therefore, the accompaniment remained in quavers, but there were twice as many downbeats – a bumpy ride, compared to what Schubert had in mind, but perhaps easier to read.

People often explain that the key was changed from G flat to G because it made it easier to play, but in fact it doesn't. The chord of G flat major is all on the black notes, which makes it very comfortable, especially on Viennese pianos, which had unusually long black notes. The answer lies, I think, in the way pianos were tuned. Nowadays, with all our semitones equal (the tuning system known as 'equal temperament') G major and G flat major sound exactly the same (unless you suffer from perfect pitch). But in Schubert's day, semitones were of different sizes, giving different keys a genuinely different colour. G flat major was on the edge of the possible, with the interval from G flat to B flat being unusually wide.

The last impromptu shares the same reason for delay. Its key signature is that of A flat major, but it actually begins in A flat minor, with the C flats written in as accidentals. The late, great, Schubert scholar, Elizabeth Norman McKay, was so interested in all this that she wrote a book about it, called *Schubert & the Dark Keys*. Fascinating.

It's the two initially suppressed ones that have become the favourites of the group, with their beautiful lyricism and imaginative figuration, but the first two have their different strengths. The first one's solemn march develops into a colossal structure, ending with an endearing and typical uncertainty as to whether to be in C minor or C major. The second one, in what would have been the relative major, E flat, if only the first hadn't eventually decided to end in the major, is a suave *moto perpetuo* exploring the very top notes of the latest, biggest pianos, with a middle section in the remarkably remote key of B minor – down a diminished fourth! Schubert is certainly pushing his harmonic boat out.

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