

WIGMORE HALL

Monday 25 March 2024
1.00pm

Nelson Goerner piano

George Frideric Handel (1685-1759) Chaconne in G HWV435 (1733)

Robert Schumann (1810-1856) Davidsbündlertänze Op. 6 (1837)

Lebhaft (F&E) • Innig (E) • Etwas hahnbüchen (F) • Ungeduldig (F) • Einfach (E) • Sehr rasch und in sich hinein (F) • Nicht schnell mit äusserst starker Empfindung (E) • Frisch (F) • Lebhaft (F) • Balladenmässig. Sehr rasch (F) • Einfach (E) • Mit Humor (F) • Wild und lustig (F&E) • Zart und singend (E) • Frisch (F&E) • Mit gutem Humor (F&E) • Wie aus der Ferne (F&E) • Nicht schnell (E)

Mily Balakirev (1837-1910) Islamey (1869, rev. 1902)



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It is easy to forget that **Handel** was the greatest keyboard player in England. At home, he played so much that the keys of his harpsichord were worn hollow – like spoons. But his keyboard works lack the rigour displayed by Bach. Handel's suites are not arranged so that their keynotes spell out a hymn-tune, nor do his variations set out to exhaust the contrapuntal possibilities of some innocent theme; and so perhaps they seem inconsequential in comparison. In 1720, he published eight suites, cheerfully mixing allemandes and courantes with fugues, sets of variations and free preludes so that no two suites are alike. He explained his motives in a preface: 'I have been obliged to publish Some of the following Lessons, because Surreptitious and incorrect Copies of them had got abroad. I have added several new ones to make the Work more useful, which if it meets with a favourable Reception; I will Still proceed to publish more, reckoning it my duty, with my Small Talent, to serve a Nation from which I have receiv'd so Generous a Protection.'

In 1733, another unauthorised publication presented pieces Handel had written for the Royal Princesses, who were in the habit of listening to him improvise late into the night in St Paul's Cathedral, where he'd get down to his shirt-sleeves in the heat of his inspiration. The G major *Chaconne*, with its 21 variations on its harmonies (rather than its melody, such as it is – that's not the point), is the second item in this collection. Chrysander, the first editor of a complete Handel edition, wrote rather bafflingly in 1859 that Handel's third keyboard publication appeared in Amsterdam 'in the shape of maps', also in 1733. And finally, two years later, Handel published six fugues.

Others have rushed to supplement this slender output. Liszt made a version of a *Sarabande and Chaconne* from the opera *Almira*. His son-in-law, Hans von Bülow, made a sort of power-edition of the F minor *Suite*. Liszt's Scottish pupil, Eugen d'Albert, made an edition of this *Chaconne* with coaxing dynamics and tempo changes, and additional thundering left-hand octaves – though Handel's original left hand thunders in octaves pretty well too from time to time – quite unusual in harpsichord writing. It must have been an aspect of his technique of which he was particularly proud.

Schumann played the piano in a way all his own. Words and music were very closely linked in his mind – he, of all composers of the Romantic period, is the one most likely to give a piece a title, beyond a genre description like 'Mazurka' or 'Song without Words'. Schumann's father was a publisher, and young Robert

was inspired to write stories, poems and plays. He always remained a literary man, an editor and a critic. So, reading a romantic novel could lead to a piano suite, while a poem might not confine itself to becoming a song – it could start a symphony: the motto theme of the First Symphony, for instance, perfectly fits the poetic line that inspired it. Schumann's literary imagination led him to people his music with characters, many of them simply Schumann in disguise. He could be Eusebius or Florestan or David, always fighting the Philistines (a personification of artistic ignorance that seems to have originated with Schumann). And if you notice that Clara, David, Eusebius and Florestan form an alphabetical sequence, you'll start to get some idea of how Schumann's mind worked.

The *Davidsbündlertänze* were composed in 1837, during Robert's protracted courtship of Clara Wieck, his piano teacher's prodigy daughter. The first two bars are taken from a mazurka that Clara had just composed. The mazurka proceeds from the G major chord to a C major chord, but Schumann changes that to a B major chord, followed by a gap, presumably for Clara to catch her breath. Schumann's bold progression plays a part in seven of the pieces. There are two versions of the work. The original is divided into two sets of nine pieces each, and ascribes each piece either to Eusebius or Florestan. The final piece of each set is prefaced by a phrase in the whimsical style of ETA Hoffmann – 'Hereupon Florestan stopped, and his lips trembled sorrowfully' and 'Quite redundantly, Eusebius added the following; but great happiness shone in his eyes the while'. The second edition of 1850 sweeps all that away, renames itself *Die Davidsbündler* (no mention of dancing) and smooths away some of the rougher edges of the musical language.

Balakirev, the son of a minor noble family, found it difficult to develop his innate musical talent. There were no music textbooks in Russian, and his German was poor, so he studied mathematics at university. He played the piano to help his patron, the local Count, to write a book on Beethoven, and was allowed to conduct the Count's orchestra. He met the strongly nationalist composer Glinka shortly before the latter's death, and was inspired to become the nucleus of The Five – himself, Cui, Mussorgsky, Rimsky-Korsakov and Borodin. Though he was normally a very slow composer, he finished *Islamey* in a month in the summer of 1869, inspired by the folk music of the Caucasus.

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