

WIGMORE HALL

Monday 25 October 2021 7.30pm

Seong-Jin Cho piano

Leoš Janáček (1854-1928)

Piano Sonata 1. X. 1905 ('From the Street') (1905-6)
I. Foreboding • II. Death

Maurice Ravel (1875-1937)

Gaspard de la nuit (1908)
I. Ondine • II. Le gibet • III. Scarbo

Interval

Fryderyk Chopin (1810-1849)

Scherzo No. 1 in B minor Op. 20 (c.1835)
Scherzo No. 2 in B flat minor Op. 31 (1837)
Scherzo No. 3 in C sharp minor Op. 39 (1839)
Scherzo No. 4 in E Op. 54 (1842-3)

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Hailing from South Korea, and now based in Berlin, Seong-Jin Cho brings this evening's programme to Wigmore Hall on the heels of this summer's release of his latest album for Deutsche Grammophon, which features Chopin's four scherzos, alongside Chopin's Piano Concerto No. 2 with the London Symphony Orchestra conducted by Gianandrea Noseda.

Darkness runs through this evening's programme. Janáček's deeply moving *Piano Sonata 1. X. 1905 'From the Street'* responds to a moment of state brutality with poetry and humanity. On 1 October 1905, Czech-speaking residents of the city of Brno staged a protest, appealing for a Czech university to be set up in the predominantly German-speaking city, then part of the Austro-Hungarian empire; the city's response was heavy-handed, and the rally was broken up by the army and police. A young apprentice joiner, František Pavlík, was bayoneted to death on the steps of the Besední dům.

Janáček began this elegy for Pavlík the following day and continued work on it right up to the première on 27 January 1906. Its two movements, *Předtucha* ('Foreboding'), and *Smrt* ('Death'), hint at the absence of a third, and not only was it originally conceived in three parts - 'Foreboding', 'Elegy', and 'Funeral March' - but it is lucky that more was not lost. Discontented with the final movement, in a rehearsal for the première, Janáček grabbed the score from the pianist and ripped it out, burning it in the stove. In Prague later that year, Janáček hurled the manuscript into the river Vltava. The pianist who premièred the work still had her copy, however, and in 1924 Janáček was to concede to the two remaining movements' publication, retitling the second 'Death'.

The diabolical presence evoked by the titular devilish character in Ravel's 1908 *Gaspard de la Nuit* is perhaps especially strongly felt by the pianist: while all three movements, 'Ondine', 'The Gibbet', and 'Scarbo', have a reputation for their difficulty, the latter is a particularly fiendish technical challenge. Ravel took inspiration from a selection of prose poems of Aloysius Bertrand, whose work, published posthumously in the three-volume collection *Gaspard de la Nuit, Fantaisies à la manière de Rembrandt et de Callot* (1842) was strongly to influence French literary romanticism.

'Ondine' is a water sprite, a siren who entices young men away to her castle with the promise of power. Ravel supplies seductive, cascading, shimmering piano writing, his melody materialising from the arpeggio shapes. 'The Gibbet' paints a dark scene: a corpse, suspended, exposed to the elements and public scorn, a bell tolling in the background, evoked with use of a B flat pedal. Ravel's attitude is meditative: a strangely distanced observer, establishing an almost photographic stillness balancing the three movements, before 'Scarbo's fearsome

chaos. In Bertrand's poem, 'Scarbo' is a malevolent nocturnal visitor, a nightmarish dwarf who, in the space between wakefulness and dreaming, takes on the proportions of a gothic cathedral: 'How often have I heard his laughter buzz in the shadow of my alcove, and his fingernail grate on the silk of the curtains of my bed!'

Ever since their composition, Chopin's four glittering, turbulent scherzos have captivated audiences and pianists alike with their drama, as well as with Chopin's radical manipulation of the scherzo form. Scherzo means 'jest', and early in the 19th Century the scherzo was foreign to the piano repertory, typically a triple meter, lively movement within a cyclic or multi-movement work. Searching for musical vehicles for his expansive ideas, Chopin reinvented the scherzo as a stand-alone, virtuosic form for solo piano.

Chopin's scherzos date from the 1830s and early 1840s. The first, in B minor, was composed roughly three years after he arrived in Paris from Warsaw in 1831 at the age of just 21. By this point, his mature style was already in place, cemented through the mazurkas, nocturnes, and études, but alongside rethinking the scherzo he began to establish his reputation in more extended forms, exploring possibilities in the ballade and polonaise. Completed around 1835, Chopin dedicated the first Scherzo to the wine-merchant Thomas Albrecht. Such was the popularity of the second Scherzo, in B flat minor, that Liszt frowned upon students performing it at his masterclasses. The third, in C sharp minor, was composed during the winter Chopin spent in Mallorca with his partner George Sand and her children, living in an abandoned monastery, his health failing him. Cho explains that only after having the opportunity to visit and imagine Chopin there could he 'finally understand the music's inner drama and bleakness.' It is the fourth, in E major, that Cho considers the greatest pianistic challenge. 'The music harkens back to the brilliant, more flashy style of Chopin's earlier years in Warsaw, yet softened by maturity,' he says.

Even if the scherzos span a decade in which Chopin artistically mellowed, when performed together, they work as a cycle: 'they seem to feel comfortable all in one place', as Cho puts it. 'I think it's because the pieces are so different in character, yet there is great contrast within each individual scherzo. For example, the B minor Scherzo's two opening chords are like a scream. And, while the main theme has a joking quality, it is a "joke of the devil".' The bittersweet irony in Chopin's sense of 'scherzo' is that humour always comes hand-in-hand with violence, pain, and loss. As Schumann put it, 'how is gravity to clothe itself if humour wears such dark veils?'

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