

WIGMORE HALL

Wednesday 26 April 2023
7.30pm

Jonathan Plowright 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

Francis Poulenc (1899-1963)

Les soirées de Nazelles (1930-6)

*Préambule. Extrêmement animé et décidé • Cadence.
Largo • Variations: Le comble de la distinction. Vif et gai
• Le cœur sur la main. Modéré • La désinvolture et la
discrétion. Presto • La suite dans les idées. Très large et
pompeux • Le charme enjôleur. Très allant • Le
contentement de soi. Très vite et très sec • Le goût du
malheur. Lent et mélancolique • L'alerte vieillesse. Très
rapide et bien sec • Cadence. Très large et très
librement • Final. Follement vite, mais très précis*

César Franck (1822-1890)

Prélude, choral et fugue (1884)

*I. Prélude. Moderato • II. Choral. Poco più lento •
III. Fugue. Tempo I*

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Although not a composer-pianist in the mould of Rubinstein, Rachmaninov, Skryabin, Prokofiev or Shostakovich, **Tchaikovsky** still shaped the solo piano repertoire in important ways. Like many members of the Russian gentry, he received his first lessons at home and never forgot his childhood teacher, Mariya Palchikova. Many of his best works for the instrument were targeted at Russia's growing audience of talented amateur musicians, and publishers offered handsome royalties for accessible and expertly crafted miniatures, certain that their investment would be amply repaid. Tchaikovsky could be dismissive of such commissions, but his profound professionalism meant that the resulting works were seldom conventional or merely opportunistic.

The Seasons Op. 37a were commissioned in late 1875 by Nikolay Bernard, who approached Tchaikovsky for a sequence of short works to be published in his popular music journal, *Nouvelliste*. The always impecunious composer was flattered, replying to Bernard that 'I am most grateful for your courtesy and readiness to pay me such a high fee.' The 12 movements of *The Seasons* appeared each month over the course of 1876 and were prefaced by short verses by a selection of Russian poets. Whilst such works were designed to make both their composer and publisher a good deal of money, their interest is more than merely mercenary. In the decade following his graduation from the St Petersburg Conservatory, Tchaikovsky had drawn on a wide range of influences to fashion a voice of his own. He was especially indebted to Schumann, whose inspiration is clear not just in *The Seasons*, but also in the *Children's Album* Op. 39 (1878) and the *12 Pieces of moderate difficulty* Op. 40 (1878).

Such commissions also helped Tchaikovsky to refine his command of form through the effective juxtaposition of succinct character pieces. Here, there is an unexpected overlap with another great score from this period: *Swan Lake* (1875-6). Famed for its application of symphonic principles of musical narrative to the supposedly minor genre of ballet music, *Swan Lake* represents a productive point of contact with Tchaikovsky's piano miniatures, where one similarly encounters a combination of dance forms and popular melodies.

Tchaikovsky's academic training and affinity with Western European music set him apart from the group of 19th-century Russian musicians known as the *moguchaya kuchka*, or 'Mighty Handful'. These composers – Balakirev, Borodin, Cui, Musorgsky and Rimsky-Korsakov – all had full-time day jobs and mostly eschewed careers as professional musicians. Another nickname was 'The Five', and it was surely their example that a group of early 20th-century French composers had in mind when they published their *Album des Six* in 1920.

Of the musicians who made up '*Les Six*' – Auric, Durey, Honegger, Milhaud, Poulenc and Tailleferre – it is **Poulenc** who is undoubtedly the best known. *Les soirées de Nazelles* is a suite that was composed between 1930

and 1936 and whose title alludes to the elegant gatherings that Poulenc would host at his country house at Noizay, on the River Loire, near Tours. There, he would entertain his friends with playful musical improvisations that sought to capture something of their distinct personalities, although the published score makes no reference to particular individuals. Instead, the movements allude to eight universal human character traits – distinction, generosity, casualness and discretion, single-mindedness, seductive charm, self-satisfaction, a taste for unhappiness, and lively old-age – bookended by an opening 'preamble' and a closing 'cadenza and finale'.

These portraits are full of musical allusions too. Couperin's *Les folies françaises* was clearly one source of inspiration, and at one point, Poulenc even considered calling the work *Le carnaval de Nazelles* in homage to Schumann's *Carnival*. Here and there, one can catch a whiff of the cabaret and the *café-chantant*, and Satie's eccentric genius is another audible influence, just as it was for all of the members of *Les Six*. In the 1920s, Poulenc befriended Prokofiev, who was then living in emigration. The two men loved to play bridge together, and one can hear echoes of the Russian composer's brittle, acerbic musical style, filtered through the easy charm of Poulenc's worldly muse.

In *The Seasons* and *Les soirées de Nazelles*, Tchaikovsky and Poulenc evoke the manners of the 19th-century Russian salon and the flirtatious world of the interwar French house party. By contrast, in his *Prélude, choral et fugue*, **Franck** ushers us into the reverent solemnity of the organ loft (his students at the Paris Conservatory referred to him as 'Father Franck'). Franck spent most of his life as titular organist of the Basilica of St Clotilde in Paris and unsurprisingly, much of his output consists of organ and choral music for liturgical use. Belgian by birth, he shared none of the contempt for German culture that swept French society after France's defeat by Prussia in 1871. The *Prélude, choral et fugue* – composed in 1884 – pays explicit homage to Bach and illustrates Franck's determination to put his virtuosity at the service of form.

The opening *Prélude* is as florid and improvisatory as a Bach keyboard toccata. The *Prélude* flows directly into the reflective piety of the *Choral*, where Franck seems to nod towards the bell-like sonorities and religious ritual of Wagner's *Parsifal*, premièred just two years earlier. In turn, the *Choral* leads directly into the massive *Fugue*, whose opening theme is crabbed, knotty and convoluted. Ever the ironist, Saint-Saëns complained that 'the choral is not a choral, and the fugue is not a fugue', and it is true that Franck seems closer to the bravura spontaneity of Liszt than to the scholastic rigour of Bach. Yet beneath their surface, the individual movements of the *Prélude, choral et fugue* are bound together by the subtle use of two repeated musical motifs, lending Franck's triptych a powerful sense of rhetorical coherence and dramatic purpose.

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